

Return TO THE STARS

Optimistic narrative RPG



Mark Sabalauskas

 festiveninja

*“What other people, real or imaginary,
do and think and feel...
is an essential guide
to our understanding
of what we ourselves are and may become.”*

Ursula K. Le Guin



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*For Aiden, Maura and Nick
I am looking forward to the amazing futures you will make!*



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Forward



The Climate Wars of the 21st century nearly ended life on Earth. Humanity survived because people kept struggling for a better world. This was an era that saw the dawn of planetary engineering techniques, social investments, and genetic enhancements that increased people's intelligence, empathy, and curiosity.

Peace, increased human capabilities, and optimism from overcoming the challenges of the Climate Wars led to a global renaissance in culture, science, and technology. Humanity soon spread through the solar system: terraforming Mars and Venus, and modifying and enhancing life to thrive in varied environments.

First-generation stellar drives enabled the exploration and colonization of the Local Interstellar Cloud. Second-generation drives extended that reach considerably, but the impact of these technologies was dwarfed by the discovery of hyperspace topology and the development of origami engines. A hyperspace beacon, built with enormous effort out the planet Mars itself, enabled near-instantaneous navigation through folded space. The entire galaxy was in reach, and a galactic civilization was born.

With easy access to countless worlds and untold resources, humanity sorted itself into like-minded communities, with novelty relishing traders and tourists moving freely between them. Our story starts in one such society, a collection of nearby star systems known as the Convention Authority (CA), founded to celebrate the most important pop cultural works of the 20th and 21st centuries: science fiction, fantasy, and gaming. Your characters have grown up in a civilization similar to a continuous Worldcon, Arisia, Gen Con, or Pax, but powered by future technology.

Suddenly and without warning, the Stellar Beacon at Mars went silent, instantaneously rendering every origami engine ship inoperable and ending galactic civilization. The systems of the Convention Authority were able to stay united and in contact, because fans had collected a replica fleet of historic starships powered by first-generation stellar drives.

After a century of effort, the CA has been able to create a spaceship powered by a long-range second-generation stellar drive. Its purpose: to return to the stars, and reconnect the lost civilizations of humanity.

Your characters are competing to join the crew of this starship.

Welcome to Return to the Stars!

If you've never played a roleplaying game before, here's the basic idea: you get together with friends and tell an interactive story about a group of characters you make up. You get to say what challenges and obstacles those characters face, how they respond, what they say and do, and what happens to them.

It's not all just conversation, though—sometimes you'll use dice and these rules to bring uncertainty into the story; thus making things more exciting.

What You Need to Play

Getting into the game is simple. You will need:

- A number of people. One of you is going to be the gamemaster (GM), and everyone else is going to be a player. We'll explain what that means in a moment.
- Character sheets that describes a protagonist in the story, one per player, and perhaps some extra paper for note-taking. We'll talk about what's on the character sheet below. In this quick-start version of the game, we've included ready-made characters that you can print out and get started with immediately. In the full version of the game there are rules which will allow you to create nearly any type of character you can imagine.
- Fate dice, at least four, and preferably four dice per person. Fate dice are a special kind of six-sided dice that are marked on two sides with a plus symbol (+), on two sides with a minus symbol (–), and two sides are blank (0). You can get these dice from many hobby and game stores. If you don't want to use Fate dice, you don't have to—any set of regular six-sided dice will work. If you're using regular dice read 5 or 6 as +, 1 or 2 as –, and 3 or 4 as 0.
- Tokens to represent fate points—players can spend these to do special things in the game. Coins, poker chips, glass beads, or anything similar will work. You'll want to have about thirty or so of these on hand for the group. You can use a written record instead, but physical tokens are more fun!
- Index cards are very handy for recording aspects during play.

*“C. S. Lewis fan: ‘I’d like to visit Narnia.’
Tolkien fan: ‘I’d like to live in Middle-earth.’
George R. R. Martin fan: ‘Nope, I’m good.’”*
— **Xeni Jardin**

Players and Gamemasters

In any game of *Return to the Stars*, you’re either a player or a gamemaster.

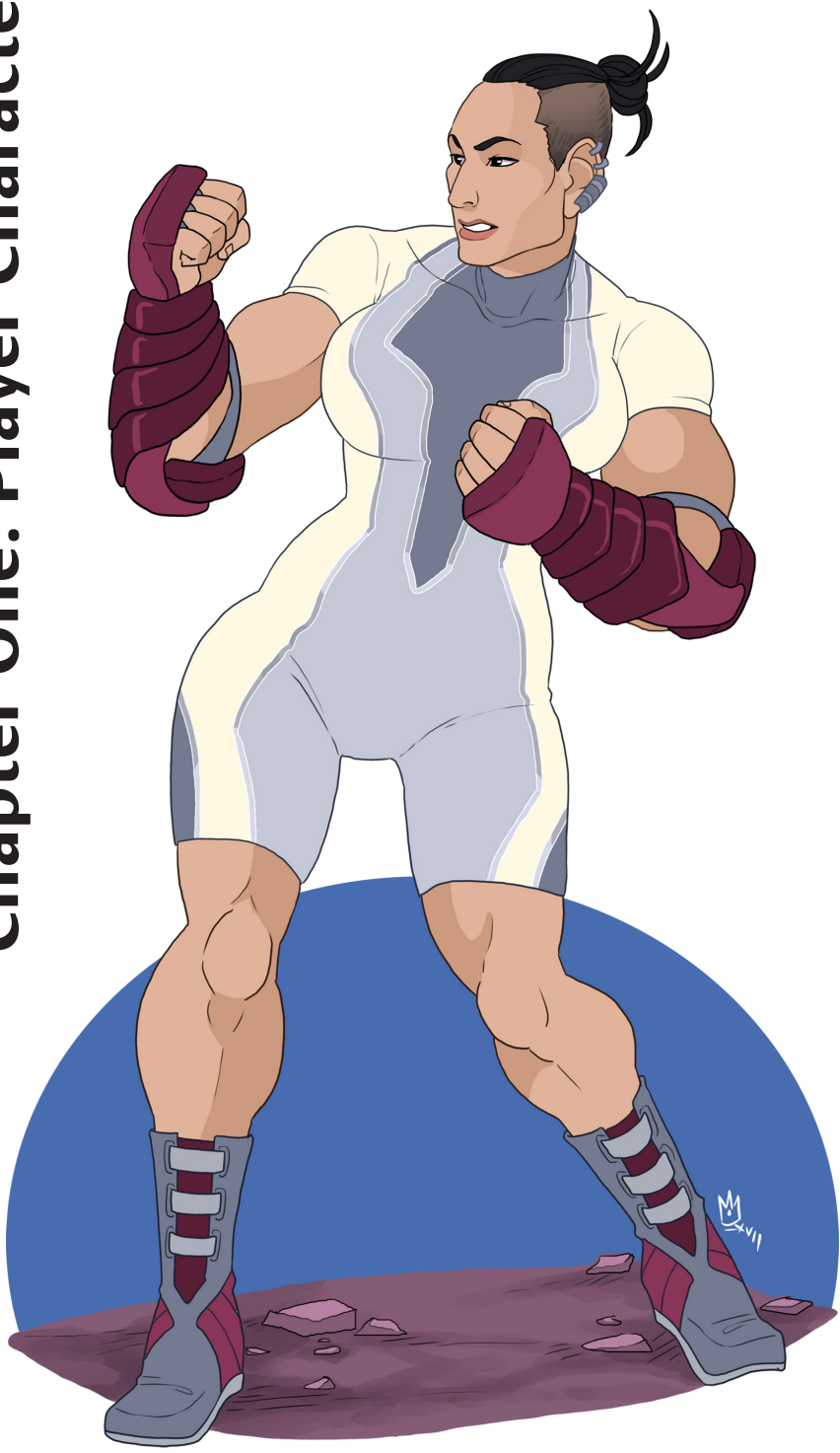
If you’re a **player**, your primary job is to take responsibility for portraying one of the protagonists of the game, which we call a player character (or PC for short). You make decisions for your character, and describe to what your character says and does. You’ll also take care of the mechanical side of your character—rolling dice when it’s appropriate, choosing what abilities to use in a certain situation, and keeping track of fate points.

If you’re a **gamemaster**, your main job is to take responsibility for the world the PCs inhabit. You make decisions and roll dice for every character in the game world who isn’t portrayed by a player—we call these non-player characters (or NPCs). You describe the environments and places the PCs visit in the game, and the scenarios and situations they interact with. You also act as a final arbiter of the rules, determining the outcome of the PCs’ decisions and how that impacts the story as it unfolds. We’ve provided a complete introduction to being a gamemaster in Chapter 3.

Both players and gamemasters also have a secondary job: **make everyone around you look awesome**. Everyone should share ideas and look for opportunities to make the events as entertaining as possible.

We’ll start by describing the things that players need to know, then give additional information relevant to the gamemaster and provide an adventure that they can run.

Chapter One: Player Characters



*“When you’re in jail,
a good friend will be trying to bail you out.
A best friend will be in the cell next to you saying,
‘Damn, that was fun’.”*
Groucho Marx



Your characters are extremely skilled explorers venturing into the unknown to rediscover the lost worlds of humanity.

In *Return to the Stars*, you’ll typically spend a session with your friends creating your characters and defining the relationships between them. See chapter two for details.

The characters you create can be wild mashups of pop cultural archetypes because they are citizens of a civilization that developed out of a massive, multi-planetary science/fantasy/gaming convention in a futuristic society with advanced technology and sophisticated genetic engineering.

You could create a cosplaying science officer whose passion in life is writing *Anne of Green Gables* slash fiction, the child of a very traditional werewolf clan looking to escape the confines of tribal life in space, or even a rebel against societal norms who doesn’t define their identity through antiquated pop culture.

If you’ve played other tabletop roleplaying games before, you’ll probably notice that *Return to the Stars* is far more focused on who your character is than what they can do. It is a game where what someone cares about is more important than what equipment they happen to be carrying.

Characters can really come alive in play when they have histories of their own and with each other.

We’ve also provided ready-made characters so you can get started quickly after reviewing your character’s sheet.

Each *character sheet* contains everything you need to know about your PC—abilities, personality, significant background elements, and any resources that character has to use in the game.

Here’s an example of a character sheet:

ASPECTS

High concepts **Straight Shooting Scientist**
Trouble: Wait, that looks interesting...
Aspect: Science Advances One Funeral at a Time
Aspect: Mistakes Lead to Success
Aspect: My Destiny is in the Stars!

SKILLS

+4 Science
+3 Blast, Acrobatics
+2 Cosplay, Networking, Empathy
+1 Making, Scan, Survival, Piloting

Task resolution summary

Roll 4 Fate dice and add your skill rating. For every point you exceed the opposition you gain a shift.

Opposition is either active (another character rolls against you) or passive (a target number set by the gamemaster)

There are 4 outcomes:

- Fail: You don't succeed, or do so at a major cost
- Tie (0 shifts): succeed at a minor cost
- Succeed (1-2 shifts): succeed at no cost
- Succeed with style (3+ shifts) success with an additional benefit

STUNTS

Polymath: your science skills applies equally to every domain of science
That's Funny: once per session you can succeed at any Scan roll, create an aspect to describe the scientific anomaly that drew your attention
Plasma Weapons are Messy: After you successfully shoot a target, they gain the aspect "on fire"

Tanya Parks, PhD



Bio

Signal

Stress

Consequences

1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____
2 Mild ____
4 Moderate ____
6 Severe ____

Tanya Parks is straight shooting science officer and a polymath, who the team can rely on in investigations in diverse fields from astrophysics to forensic pathology.

She's also skilled with heavy plasma weapons; her motto: "Science advances one funeral at a time."

Her innate curiosity means she can sometimes be distracted by interesting scientific anomalies.



Return
TO THE STARS
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We’ll walk through the elements of a sheet step-by-step, telling you the rules you’ll need to know. Once we’ve gone through every section, you’ll know enough to be ready to start as a player.

Gamemasters will need a bit more information that we’ll provide in the next chapter.

Aspects

Aspects are phrases that describe some truth that is significant in the game. They are the reasons why your character matters, why we're interested in seeing them in the game. Aspects can cover a wide range of elements, such as personality traits, beliefs, relationships, issues and problems, or anything else that helps us invest in the character as a person, rather than just a collection of numbers.

Two special aspects are called out for every character. The *high concept* is a phrase that sums up what your character is about—who they are and what they do. Every character also has a *trouble* that describes something that complicates their existence.

Characters have aspects, but so does the world around you. The gamemaster will tell you if a scene or an object has an aspect. You can also use your skills to create aspects. (For example, a character might attempt a trick maneuver using their Piloting skill to create the aspect "Hot on His Tail.") Typically, you'll keep track of these aspects by writing them down on index cards and placing them so everyone can see them.

Return to the Stars also has two Game Aspects that reflect its themes:

- **Hopepunk:** optimistically struggling for a better, kinder world. Caring, learning, and communicating to achieve prosocial aims.
- **Cosmopolitanism:** acting on the belief that all humanity forms a community, and that cultural differences are valuable and should be respected, but not at the expense of universal rights.

Aspects can help you in game when they are powered by fate points. When you see an opportunity that makes sense in the story, you can spend fate points to invoke an aspect and choose one of the benefits:

- Take a +2 on your current skill roll after you've rolled the dice.
 - Reroll all your dice.
 - Pass a +2 benefit to another character's roll, if it's reasonable that the aspect you're invoking would be able to help.
 - Add +2 to any source of passive opposition, if it's reasonable that the aspect you're invoking could contribute to making things more difficult. You can also use this to create passive opposition at +2 if there wasn't going to be any opposition.
- (We'll discuss using skills shortly)

Because fate points are amazing, you are going to want more of them. If you're in a situation where having or being around a certain aspect means your character's life is more dramatic or complicated, someone can compel the aspect. If you accept this complication, you'll receive an additional fate point.

That's why having a trouble aspect is useful for you—it can complicate your life in dramatic ways, giving you fate points that you can spend to be awesome later on.

Aiden's character, Amory, has the aspect "Need to Compete," which describes his tendency to make reckless decisions around people he sees as rivals. This adds an interesting, fun element to the character that can easily get him into trouble, bringing a lot of personality to the game.

Skills

Skills are used during the game to do arduous or fascinating actions. Each character has a number of skills that represent their capabilities, including things like physical prowess, professional training, education, and other measures of ability.

At the beginning of the game, the player characters have skills rated from (+1) to (+4). A higher ranked skill is better as it indicates that the character is more capable or succeeds more often when using that skill. If for some reason you need to make a roll using a skill your character doesn't have, you can always roll it at (0).

Persephone has the Scholarship skill at (+4), which makes her ideally suited to knowing obscure but useful facts and doing research. She does not have the Intrusion skill; however, so when the game calls upon her to sneak up on someone, she'll have to roll that at (+0).

Using Skills

Some of the things you'll do in the game require you to roll dice to see if your character succeeds or fails. You'll roll when you're opposing another character with your efforts, or when there's a significant obstacle in the way. If there's no interesting opposition, you can simply accomplish what you're trying to do without a dice roll.

There are **four actions** you can undertake with skills:

- **Overcome** an obstacle
- **Create** an aspect that you can use
- **Attack** someone
- **Defend** yourself or others

Working Together

Multiple players can *combine skills*. For example, a group of characters combining their Might to push over a crumbling wall.

When you combine skills, determine who has the highest skill level among the participants. Only that player rolls. Every other participant who has at least a +1 in the same skill adds a +1 to the highest person's skill level. So, if you have three helpers and you have the highest skill level, you will roll with a +3 bonus.

If you fail a roll after the players have combined their skills, all of the participants share in the potential costs—whatever complication occurs affects everyone who helped.

Skill Resolution

You roll the dice when there's some kind of intriguing opposition keeping you from achieving your goals.

- Choose the character's skill that is appropriate to the action.
- Roll four Fate dice.
- Add together the symbols showing on the dice. A + is +1, a – is –1, and a 0 is 0.
- Add your skill rating to the dice roll. The total is your result.
- You can choose to invoke one or more aspects, each of which allows you to either add +2 to your result or reroll the dice.

Interpreting Results

When you roll the dice, you're trying to get a high enough roll to match or beat your opposition. That opposition is going to come in one of two forms: active opposition from someone rolling dice against you, or passive opposition from an obstacle that has a set rating for you to overcome. (GMs, you can also decide that your NPCs give passive opposition when you don't want to roll dice for them.)

So, once you've rolled the dice, how do you determine what a result means? Glad you asked.

THE FOUR OUTCOMES

When you roll the dice, either you're going to fail, tie, succeed, or succeed with style.

Every roll you make in the game results in one of the following four outcomes:

Fail

If you roll lower than your opposition, you fail.

This could mean you don't get what you want, or that you get what you want at a serious cost. It's the GM's job to determine an appropriate cost.

Tie

If you roll the same as your opposition, you tie.

This means you get what you want but at a minor cost, or you get a lesser version of what you wanted.

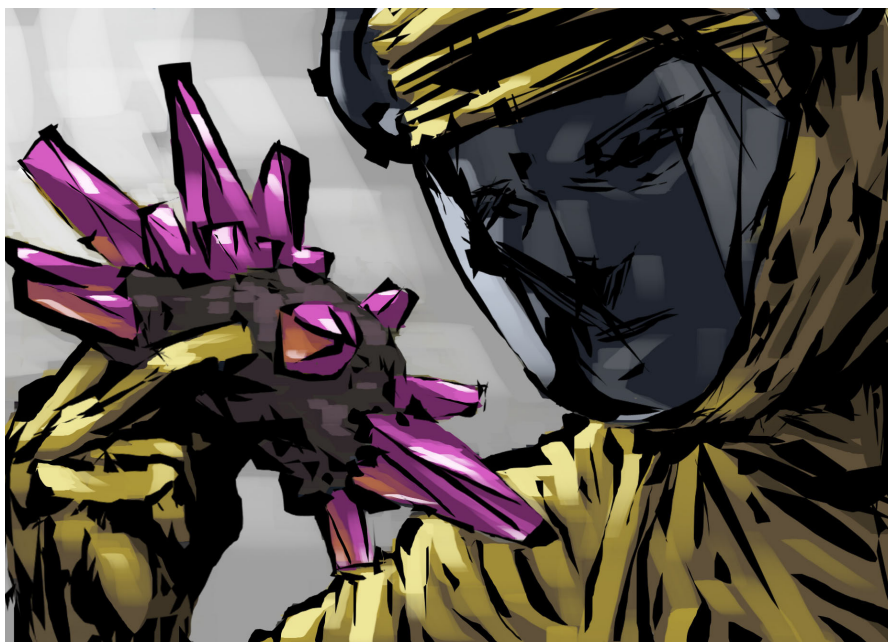
Succeed

If you roll higher than your opposition by 1 or 2 points, you succeed and get what you want.

Succeed with Style

If you roll higher than your opposition by 3 or more, you succeed with style.

This means that you not only get what you want, but you also get an added benefit on top of that.



The Four Actions

There are four types of actions:

- **Overcome**
- **Create an aspect**
- **Attack**
- **Defend**

Overcome actions

Skills allow you to accomplish things. Science can be used to investigate mysterious phenomenon. The Piloting skill can be used to navigate a shuttle through a cloud of orbital debris.

You can use a skill when your character is in a situation where the skill could be used to help them achieve a goal or remove an obstacle. The gamemaster will determine if you face active or passive opposition.

When you fail an overcome action, you have two options. You can simply fail, which means you don't attain your goal or don't get what you were after, or you can succeed at a serious cost.

(Design note—many other roleplaying games end up getting stuck in a boring place when a player fails a skill check. In this game, you always have the option of succeeding, with a side order of dramatic complications.)

When you tie an overcome action, you attain your goal or get what you were after, but at a minor cost or in a lesser way.

When you succeed at an overcome action, you attain your goal without any cost.

When you succeed with style at an overcome action, you accomplish your goal and may be able to get an additional benefit from some stunts or types of equipment.

Rex is trying to escape a death trap he accidentally set off while exploring a mysterious megacorporation's hidden laboratory. Dozens of laser beams are shooting out of the walls in a hallway, and he needs to get past them to reach the other side.

Amanda, the GM, says, "This is passive opposition, because it's simply a trap in your way. It's opposing you at (+4). Someone really doesn't want outsiders getting to the fusion re-combinator."

Rex sighs and says, "Well, I've got Acrobatics at (+3), so I'll try dodging and weaving through them to cross the hall."

Rex takes up the dice and rolls, getting –, +, +, +, for a result of +2. His total is +5, high enough to succeed.

Amanda announces, “You manage to make it through to the other side! The lasers show no sign of stopping, though—you’ll still have to deal with them on your way out.”

Rex replies, “Just another day at the office,” and continues on.

Create an Advantage

You can use your skills to take advantage of the environment or situation you’re in or discovering something new about it.

This could mean that you’re doing something to actively change your circumstances (like throwing sand in an opponent’s eyes or setting something on fire), but it could also mean that you’re uncovering new information that helps you (like learning the weakness of a warbot through research), or leveraging something you’ve previously observed (like your opponent’s predisposition to being in a foul temper).

When you roll to create an advantage, you must specify whether you’re creating a new aspect or taking advantage of an existing aspect. Opposition might be active or passive, depending on the circumstances. If your target is another character, their roll always counts as a defend action.

It should be noted that the creating an advantage action has both *game mechanical consequences* (you may leverage a created aspect to more easily achieve goals later in the game) and a *storytelling function* (creating new aspects shows that you are learning or creating something true about the world). You might use this action to explore the narrative implications of gaining knowledge, even if you don’t have a pressing need to create bonuses in a game.

If you are trying to **create an advantage on an existing aspect**:

When you fail, you give a free invocation on that aspect to someone else instead. That could be your opponent in a conflict, or any character who could tangibly benefit to your detriment.

When you tie or succeed, you place a free invocation on the aspect.

When you succeed with style, you place two free invocations on the aspect.

If you're using **create an advantage to make a new aspect**:

When you fail, you either don't create the aspect, or you do create it but someone else gets the free invocation; whatever you end up doing works to someone else's advantage instead. That could be your opponent in a conflict, or any character who could tangibly benefit to your detriment. You may have to reword the aspect to show that the other character benefits instead—work it out with the other players in whichever way makes the most sense.

When you tie, you create the new aspect, but no one gets any free invocations on it.

When you succeed, you create a situation aspect and you get a single free invocation. We typically write down the new aspect on a note card, so that everyone knows that it exists and can be invoked and compelled. We also put a coin or other marker on the aspect to keep track of the free invocation.

When you succeed with style, you get a situation aspect with two free invocations instead of only one. You can place two coins or markers on the aspect's note card to track this.

Rana is fleeing a pair of Black Nebula Mercenaries who have chased her into seemingly abandoned space station.

Worried that she's outnumbered, Rana's player says to the game-master, "Amanda, you said they were using flame rifles. Can I adjust the station's oxygen levels so their weapons become dangerous to use?"

Amanda nods and says, "Sounds like you're trying to create an advantage with Science. They haven't caught up with you yet, so to succeed you'll merely have to overcome a passive difficulty of +1 to reflect your stress of trying to work under pressure."

Rana has the Science skill at +3. Her player rolls a +1, for a total of +4 against the difficulty of +1; Rana succeeds with style!

Amanda writes "Highly Oxygenated Atmosphere" on an index card so everyone can easily keep track of the new aspect, and notes that Rana can invoke that aspect twice for free. Rana's player places two tokens on the card to indicate her free aspects.

Rana feels better knowing she's got a trick in her back pocket for the coming confrontation . . .

Defend

Whenever someone attacks you in a conflict or tries to create an advantage on you (to your detriment), you always get a chance to defend.

Because you roll to defend as a reaction, your opposition is almost always active. If you're rolling a defend action against passive opposition, it's because the environment is hostile to you somehow (like a blazing fire), or the attacking NPC isn't important enough for the GM to bother with dice.

When you fail at a defend action, you suffer the consequences of whatever you were trying to prevent. You might take a hit (see the section on stress and consequences below) or create an aspect reflecting an advantage someone now has at your expense.

When you tie or succeed at a defense, you successfully avoid the attack or the attempt to gain an advantage on you.

When you succeed with style at defense, you avoid the attack or attempt to create an advantage against you. Additionally, you have the option of spending a fate point to immediately counter-attack your opponent at +2 as a bonus action.

Attack

Use the attack action to harm someone in a conflict or to take them out of a scene.

The attack action is the most straightforward of the four actions—when you want to hurt someone in a conflict, you will use an attack.

Most of the time, your target will actively oppose your attack. Passive opposition on an attack means you've caught your target unaware, otherwise unable to mount a resistance, or the NPC isn't important enough to bother with dice.

In addition, passive or not, the opposition against you always counts as a defensive action, so you can look at these two actions as being inexorably intertwined.

When you fail at an attack, you don't cause any harm to your target. If your opponent succeeds with style defending, not only are they unharmed, but they have the option of spending a fate point to immediately counterattack you at +2.

When you tie an attack, you don't cause any harm.

When you succeed on an attack, you inflict a hit on your target equal to the number of shifts you got. That forces the target to try and “buy off” the value of your hit by taking stress or consequences; if that’s not possible, your target gets taken out of the conflict. There is normally no additional benefit for **succeeding with style** beyond doing more damage, although some stunts or equipment can give you enhanced results when you succeed with style.



BioSignals: Stress and Consequences

When characters find themselves in harm’s way—a fairly common occurrence since they’re highly competent, proactive, and face drama at every turn—they have two ways to stand their ground and stay on their feet: stress and consequences. **Stress** represents the short-term toll of participating in a conflict, whereas **consequences** are the lingering effects of taking harm.

Tanya Parks, PhD



Bio Signal

Stress
1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____

Consequences

2 Mild _____

4 Moderate _____

6 Severe _____

Tanya Parks is straight shooting science officer and a polymath, who the team can rely on in investigations in diverse fields from astrophysics to forensic pathology.

Stress

Stress is one of the two options you have to avoid losing a conflict—it represents becoming temporarily fatigued, getting winded, suffering superficial injuries, and so on. You have a number of stress boxes that you can burn off to keep going in a fight; they reset at the end of a conflict, once you've had a moment to rest and catch your breath. The more stress boxes your character has, they more resilient they are.

When you use a stress box, you reduce the shift value of the attack by the numeric value of the stress box. You can only use one stress box to mitigate any single attack.

Consequences

Consequences are the other option you have to stay in a conflict, but they have a more lasting impact. Every time you take a consequence, it puts a new aspect on your sheet describing your injuries. Unlike stress, characters have to take time to recover from a consequence; it's stuck on your character sheet in the meantime. Consequences leave your character vulnerable to both complications and others who may wish to take advantage of your character's new weakness.

When you use a consequence slot, you reduce the shift value of the attack by the numeric value of the consequence. You may use more than one consequence at a time—if they're available. Any of the hit's remaining shifts must be handled by a stress box to avoid being taken out.

However, there's a penalty. The consequence written in the slot is an aspect that represents the lasting effect incurred from the attack. The opponent who forced you to take a consequence gets a free invocation on it, and the aspect remains on your character sheet until you've recovered the consequence slot. While it's on your sheet, the consequence is treated like any other aspect, except because the slant on it is negative, it will be invoked to your character's detriment.

You'll want to calibrate the aspect you write on your character's sheet to the nature of the consequence slot. A mild consequence might be named "Black Eye" or "Bruised Hand." Generally, they are the sort of thing that hurts, but doesn't require medical attention. Moderate consequences represent fairly serious impairments that you'd want medical attention for, e.g. a deep cut, a first-degree

burn. Serious consequences are things that require urgent care: a compound fracture, a second-degree burn, etc.

In *Return to the Stars* the Cosplay skill, which includes granular genetic control of bodily functions, is used to recover from consequences. You need to perform an overcome action against a resistance equal to the stress the consequence can absorb; Cosplay overcoming a skill of 2 for a mild consequence, 4 for a moderate consequence, etc. Increase the difficulty by 2 if you are using your Cosplay skill on another character. After a successful roll to recover, you may rename the consequence to indicate that it has been treated (for example a “Gash” could become a “Healing Scab”). After a character has been treated, you just have to wait for the healing to be complete before removing the aspect and clearing the slot:

- A recovering **mild consequence** is cured after the current scene has passed.
- A **moderate consequence** is cleared at the beginning of the next play session.
- A **severe consequence** is removed at the start of the next scenario.

Getting Taken Out

If you don't have any stress or consequences left to buy off all the shifts of a hit, that means you're *taken out*.

Being taken out is bad—it means that not only can your character no longer fight, but also that the person who defeated you character gets to decide what your loss looks like . . . and what happens to you after the conflict. Obviously, they can't narrate anything that's out of scope for the conflict (for instance, having you literally die from embarrassment); nevertheless, it still gives another player a lot of power over your character that you can't do much about. So, you might want to consider conceding the conflict before you can be taken out.

*“A poem or story consciously written...
to bring about a specific result..
has abdicated its first duty and privilege,
its responsibility to itself.”*

Ursula K. Le Guin

Conceding the Conflict

When all else fails, you can decide to give in. Maybe you're worried that you can't absorb another hit, or you decide that continuing to fight isn't worth the punishment. Whatever the reason, you can interrupt any action at any time before the roll is made and declare that you concede the conflict. Note the timing—once dice hit the table, you have to live with the outcome.

Concession gives the other side what they wanted from you. You're out of the conflict.

But it's not all bad. First, you get a fate point for choosing to concede. On top of that, if you've sustained any consequences in this conflict, you get an additional fate point for each consequence. These fate points may be used once this conflict is over.

Second, you get to narrate your concession to avoid the worst (or most embarrassing) details of your fate. You lost, and the narration must reflect that, but you get to shape the outcome.

That can make the difference between, say, being mistakenly left for dead on the field of battle and ending up shackled in the enemy's clutches—the sort of thing that can happen if you're taken out instead. That's not nothing. And the fate points you receive for conceding mean you have a chance to be awesome in future scenes.

This game isn't a gritty simulation of combat, rather it recreates the tropes of space operas. It's part of the genre that heroes suffer temporary setbacks before succeeding later!



“Adventure is not outside man; it is within.”
George Eliot

Stunts

Stunts are special tricks that your character knows that allow you to get an extra benefit. Stunts are like special moves in a video game, letting you do something unique. Two characters might have the same rating in a skill, but having different stunts makes these characters distinct and exciting in play.

Percy has a stunt called Research Montage. It allows her to use the Scholarship skill to quickly accomplish tasks that would normally require extensive investigation or research, even when a library or archive is not available.

Fate Points

Every character in this quickstart game starts the session with three fate points. You’ll want to use coins, tokens, or something else to represent how many fate points you have at any given time during play.

Gamemasters get a number of fate points equal to the number of players in the scene, unless their total at the end of the last scene was higher, in which case the gamemaster should continue with the higher total.

Fate points are one of your most important resources in the game—you can use them to make the story go in your character’s favor.

You can spend fate points to:

- **Invoke an aspect**
- **Declare a story detail**
- **Activate** certain powerful stunts

You earn fate points by accepting a compel on one of your aspects.

Invoking an Aspect

Whenever you're making a skill roll, and you're in a situation where an aspect might be helpful, you can spend a fate point to invoke it in order to change the dice result. This allows you to either reroll the dice or add +2 to your roll, whichever is more helpful. You do this after you've rolled the dice—if you aren't happy with your total.

You also have to explain or justify how the aspect is helpful in order to get the bonus—sometimes it'll be self-evident, and sometimes it might require a bit of creative narrating.

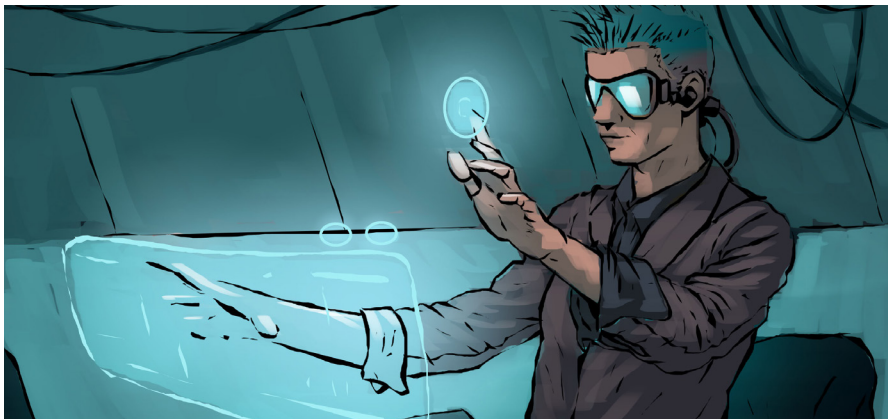
You can spend more than one fate point on a single roll, gaining another reroll or an additional +2, as long as each point that you spend invokes a different aspect.

Strathclyde is asking around at the space port, trying to find out who is fencing stolen power converters. His Networking skill is +2, and the criminal has a passive opposition of +3.

The player rolls a 0. Adding his skill, this is one point short.

Strathclyde has the aspect "I Served with a Chap Once . . ." With assent from the GM, the player spends a fate point to invoke the aspect, adding +2 to the outcome, giving him a total of +4, and exceeding the opposition. While tracking down rumors, Strathclyde stumbles across a bartender who used to be a steward on a troop ship where Strathclyde was once assigned, and the bartender points him in the right direction . . .





Declaring a Story Detail

Sometimes, you want to add a detail that works to your character's advantage in a scene. For example, you might use this to narrate a convenient coincidence, such as retroactively having the right supplies for a certain job ("Of Course I Brought That Along!") at a dramatically appropriate moment. Alternatively, you might suggest that you and the NPC you've just met have clients in common.

To do this, you'll spend a fate point. You should try to justify your story by relating them to an aspect. GMs have the right to veto any suggestions that seem out of scope or to ask the player to revise the detail, especially if the rest of the group isn't buying it.

Note: aspects are always already true within the game—you never need to spend a fate point to make them true. This rule is about quickly filling in additional detail.

Our party of heroes has learned that the villainous Baron Vrka intends to unleash a neoplague targeting the inhabitants of Pico 4C.

Amory has the aspect "Ruthless Strategist in a Secret War." His player holds up a fate point and says "Anticipating Vrka would continue his maniacal plots against this planet, I had agents obtain the DNA of his late fiancée. She is currently being cloned on Pico. I say we contact the Baron, and let him know that if he continues, he'll be dooming the woman he loves to a second death!"

The gamemaster wasn't anticipating this, but thinks there is a lot drama here. The player tosses over a fate point and prepares for a defiant confrontation.

Earning Fate Points

There are three ways to earn fate points:

- **Accept a Compel:** You get a fate point when you agree to the complication associated with a compel. (Note: this fate point comes from the common pool, not from the gamemaster's fate points.)
- **Have Your Aspects Invoked Against You:** If someone pays a fate point to invoke an aspect attached to your character, you gain their fate point at the end of the scene. This includes both advantages and consequences created on your character.
- **Concede in a Conflict:** You receive one fate point from the common pool for conceding in a conflict, as well as an additional fate point for each consequence that you've received in that conflict. (Note: you don't get fate points for being taken out in a conflict, so it usually makes sense to concede before you are taken out.)

A point can be awarded retroactively if players recognize someone immersed in roleplay acted "as if" they had accepted a complication.

Compels

Sometimes you'll find yourself in a situation where an aspect complicates your character's life, and creates unexpected drama. When that happens, the GM will suggest a potential complication that might arise. This is called a compel.

A compel means your character automatically fails at some goal, your character's choices are restricted, or simply that unintended consequences cloud whatever your character does. You might negotiate back and forth on the particulars a little, to arrive at what would be most appropriate and dramatic in the moment.

Once you've agreed to accept the complication, you get a fate point for your trouble. If you want, you can instead pay a fate point to prevent the complication from happening, but we don't recommend you do that very often—you'll probably need that fate point later, and getting compelled brings drama (and hence fun) into your game's story. Remember, you can negotiate the details.

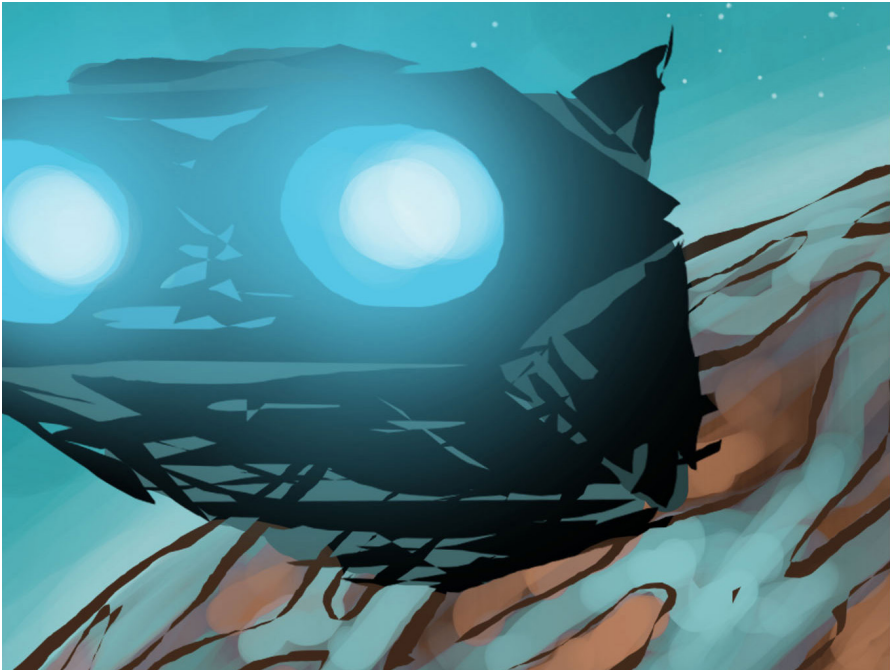
Players, you're going to call for a compel when you want there to be a snag in a decision you've just made, if it's related to one of your aspects. GMs, you're going to call for a compel when you make the world respond to the characters in a complicated or dramatic way.

Anyone at the table is free to suggest when a compel might be appropriate for any character (including their own). GMs, you have the final word on whether or not a compel is valid. Anyone should feel free to speak up if they see that a compel happened naturally as a result of play, but everyone was too caught up in the story that the chance to award the point was missed.

Isabella has the aspect "Let's Get On with This!" Her friends are busily engaged in hacking into a computer, and she is supposed to stand guard outside.

The GM says, "As you scan the nearby streets, you see a man crossing the road who looks like the spy you encountered on Procyon V." Holding up a fate point she adds, "Would Isabella like to abandon her post to chase after him?"

The player agrees, taking the fate point, and runs—alone—after the suspect.



Chapter Two: Creating Characters



*“First of all,
if I got to decide what I was,
I’d be a Koala.”*
Diablo Cody

Character Creation

We’ve shown you what a player character looks like. Creating your own character is very straightforward:

1. Come up with five aspects that describe your character: their high concept, trouble, mission, and two additional aspects.
2. Name: name your character.
3. Skills: pick and rate your skills.
4. Stunts: pick three or more stunts. Document your character’s refresh score.
5. BioSignals: determine how much stress and the number of consequences your character can take.

Describe Your Character with Five Aspects

Aspects are phrases that describe some truth about your character that’s significant in the game. They’re the reasons why your character matters, and why we’re interested in telling stories about them. Aspects can cover a wide range of elements such as personality traits, beliefs, relationships, issues, and problems. They can describe what motivates your character, or what typically happens around them. Or anything else that helps us invest in the character as a person, rather than as a collection of numbers.

The best aspects are double-sided. They give you reasons for getting into trouble, and explain how you get out of it. Aspects are at the heart of how you tell exciting stories in the game. It’s where the ups and downs of narrative comes from.

If your character is a “Very Curious Biologist,” they might be tempted to wander off to investigate a strange screech, earning themselves a fate point; however, they could instead justify spending a fate point in order to be impressively effective at solving a scientific mystery.

Aspects that don’t help you tell a good story—either by giving you a

success when you need it, or by drawing you into danger and action when the story needs it—aren't doing their job.

Not every aspect has to be double-sided, but doing so increases the fun you'll have.

Aspects need to be clear. You want everyone around the table to know what they mean.

People who play role-playing games tend to be smart and creative; it can be tempting to think that an aspect ought to be concise, or to feel that aspects should be poetic and evocative. If you can come up with a great turn of phrase, that's a swell bonus. But the most important thing is that an aspect's meaning is clear to the other players. Don't fear a long, ungainly phrase if it manages to convey a vital truth about your character.

If your character concept doesn't have many connections to the other characters, talk with the group about aspects that might better tie your character in with theirs.

High Concept

Your *high concept* is the aspect that sums up what your character is about—who they are and what they do.

Think of this aspect like your vocation, your role in life, or your calling—it's what you're good at, but it's also a duty, and it likely brings its own share of problems. That is to say, like any effective aspect, it comes with pluses and minuses.

You could take the idea of "like your vocation" literally: "Principle Investigator," "First Contact Specialist," or "Starship Engineer."

It's worth noting that the Convention Authority is a postscarcity society, and loosely organized. Your character may have a vocation, but they won't have a job. They typically won't have a rank in a hierarchy, although they may well be a member of a voluntary organization.

Adding descriptive language can further define your idea: "Vivacious and Adaptable Principal Investigator," "Shape-Shifting, Gender-Fluid First Contact Specialist," and "Starship Engineer with a Big Wrench" are some possibilities.

You could mash together qualities that people might find unusual: "12-Year-Old Master of Martial Arts," "Singing Security Spe-

cialist,” or “Ambassadorial Astronomer” are unique options.

You could play off of an important relationship either in your family or in an organization you’re deeply involved with: “Proud Geologist of the Scouts Academy,” “Daughter of a Prominent Political Family,” “Covert Operative from the Eumenides” are a few examples.

These aren’t the only ways to create your high concept, but they’ll help get you started.

Don’t stress too much. You’ll come up with four other aspects after this one—you don’t have to get it all nailed right now. Also, you have an opportunity to change a single aspect after each session, so you’ll have opportunities to refine and improve your ideas.

Trouble

In addition to a high concept, every character has a *trouble* aspect that’s a part of their life and story. If your high concept is what or who your character is, your trouble is the answer to a simple question: who or what complicates your character’s existence?

Trouble brings chaos into a character’s life and drives them into interesting situations. It often involves personal struggles, problematic relationships, or ideals that drive them to take action when sensible people would run away. Examples of troubles include: Hunted by Black Nebula Mercenaries, Absentminded, Too Popular for My Own Good, and Who Needs Backup?

Your trouble shouldn’t be easily solved. If it was, your character would have done so already, which isn’t interesting. But neither should it paralyze the character completely. If the trouble is constantly interfering with the character’s life, they’re going to have to spend all their time dealing with it rather than engaging with the story everyone at the table is telling together. You shouldn’t have to deal with your trouble at every turn—unless that’s the core of one specific adventure (and even then, that’s just one adventure).

Since your trouble is an aspect, it’s something you’re able to invoke. Similarly, your other aspects can be compelled. We ask you to choose a specific trouble for two reasons. First, to ensure that you have at least one aspect that’s easily compelled. Second, so that you’ll have a well-rounded character.

Mission

Your character comes from the Convention Authority: a postscarcity utopia where, thanks to advanced technology, citizens can live for centuries in perfect health, indulge in endless pleasures, and enjoy unimaginably vast holographic archives of art and culture while robots do all the manual labor.

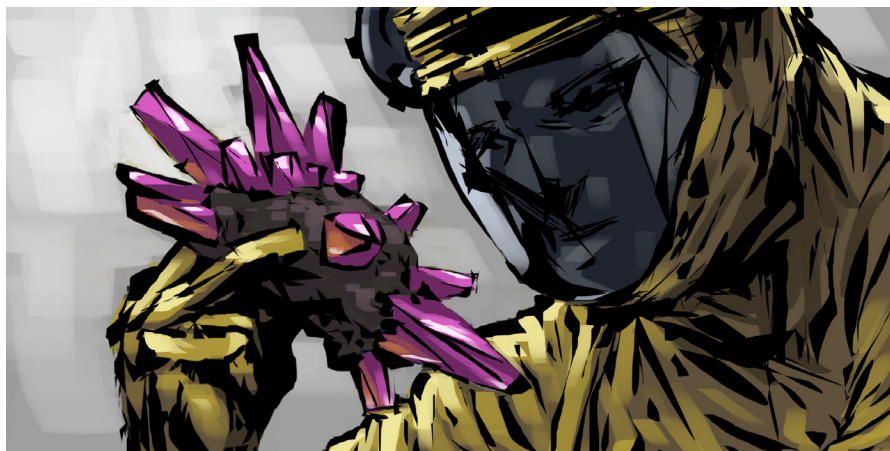
Instead of partaking in a life of luxury, your character is risking their life far from these comforts, striving to explore the galaxy and reconnect the lost worlds of humanity.

You must figure out why your character is involved in crazy adventures, and what their personal motivation is. Examples of *missions* include: “What Wonders of Nature Are out There?” “I Protect the Weak,” “Adrenaline Junkie,” or simply, “My Destiny Lies in the Stars.”

Pragmatically, your character’s mission is great hook that the GM can use to draw you further into the story. If you don’t have a compelling mission, the GM is under no obligation to go out of her way to make the game work for you—she’ll be too busy with other characters who have chosen a strong reason to participate.

Chose Two Additional Aspects

Flesh out your character with two other Aspects. These can be anything: a pet, a personality trait, a typical way of solving problems. If you’re having a hard time coming up with something, don’t force it. It’s better to leave an aspect slot blank for a while than to pick one that isn’t inspiring and evocative to play.



Pick and Rate Your Character's Skills

Once you've used aspects to flesh out your character, it's time to pick skills. You'll find descriptions and details for each skill in the "Skills" and "Stunts" sections.

Your skills form a pyramid, with a single skill rated at +4—which is sometimes referred to as your apex skill—and more skills at each lower rating on the pyramid going down to +1:

- One +4 skill
- Two +3 skills
- Three +2 skills
- Four +1 skills

As you'll recall, your characters are highly competent. A regular person might have only a single +3 skill along with a handful of skills with lower ratings. Of course, as proactive protagonists, you'll be seeking out exceptional challenges. Sometimes you'll face off against mooks of normal capability; however, an evil mastermind might have a skill rating +6 (or even higher) in their apex skill.

Pick Three to Five Stunts and Determine Your Refresh Score

Stunts change how the rules (typically related to skills) work for your character. Picking and inventing stunts are covered in the "Skills" and "Stunts" section.

You get three stunts for free, and you can take up to two more stunts at the cost of lowering your refresh by 1 each. (The more cool tricks you can do, the more you'll need to accept compels to get fate points.) Figuring out stunts can take a while, so you may want to pick one for now and determine the rest of them during play.

Documenting Refresh

A new player character in *Return to the Stars* starts with a refresh of 3. That means they'll start each session off with 3 fate points. If you pick four stunts, your refresh rate is 2 fate points at the beginning of each session. If you pick five stunts, your refresh is 1 fate point.

Determine BioSignals: Stress and Consequences

Note how much damage your character can withstand.

The description of BioSignals on page 19 fully explains what these mean and how they're used. In brief, stress represents the ephemeral toll of participating in a conflict, whereas consequences are the lingering effects of taking harm.

Stress Tracks

By default, a character has two stress boxes. The first stress box can absorb one shift of damage, the second box can handle two shifts. If a third box is added, it can absorb three shifts, and so on.

Consequence Slots

Every PC also has three consequence slots. One is mild, one is moderate, and the last slot is severe. Consequences are the injuries and traumas that you can't shake off after the dust settles. They're temporary aspects that stay in play until you treat them and recover.

Adding Tracks and Slots

The Might and Self-Control skills, as well as several stunts, can add additional consequence slots to be available to a character. See the "Skills" and "Stunts" sections for more details.

For quick reference, both Might and Self-Control grant one more stress box if either skill is rated at +1 or +2. If a player is rated at +3 or higher in Might or Self-Control, then they will receive two more stress boxes.

Should you raise your Might skill to +5 or higher, you will be granted an additional mild consequence slot.

You're All Set!

At the end of this process, you should now have a character with:

- A name
- Five aspects, along with a backstory
- A variety of skills
- Between three to five stunts
- BioSignals
- A refresh rate of 1–3 fate points

Now you're ready to play!

Space Opera Skill & Stunt Lists

Each *skill* description highlights the sort of game actions that you can use the skill for.

Some skills imply the need for gear, such as Blast, which implies that you have a ranged weapon. If you have a skill, you will also have the tools you need to use it; the effectiveness of those tools is built into the skill result.

Stunts help your character bend the rules and stand out. You start the game with stunts, and can buy more by spending refreshes at milestones.

Often stunts are tricks, maneuvers, strategies, or techniques your character has that change how a skill works for them. Generally, this means you get a bonus in certain situations, but sometimes you gain another type of benefit. Fundamentally, stunts are a way of trading a flexible fate point for something that's a bit more powerful, but also more restricted in scope.

Each skill has several stunts appropriate to a variety of settings for you to choose from.

Don't feel limited to the provided list of stunts. Feel free to use them as examples to create your own unique stunts, with the approval of the gamemaster who can judge how balanced they are in the context of the campaign. If you want formal templates and guidance on creating stunts, you can consult the *Fate Core System* published by Evil Hat Productions.

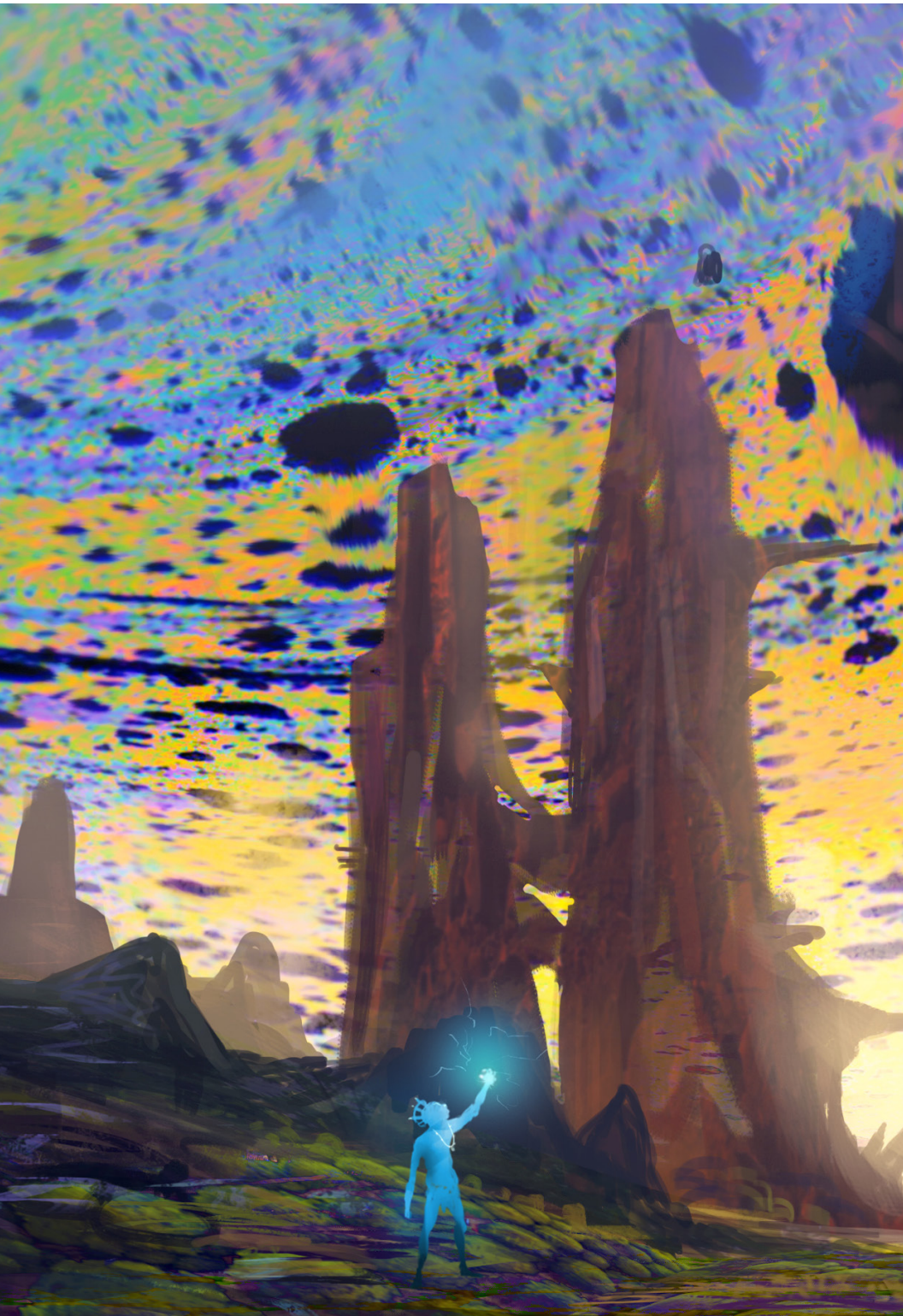
Acrobatics

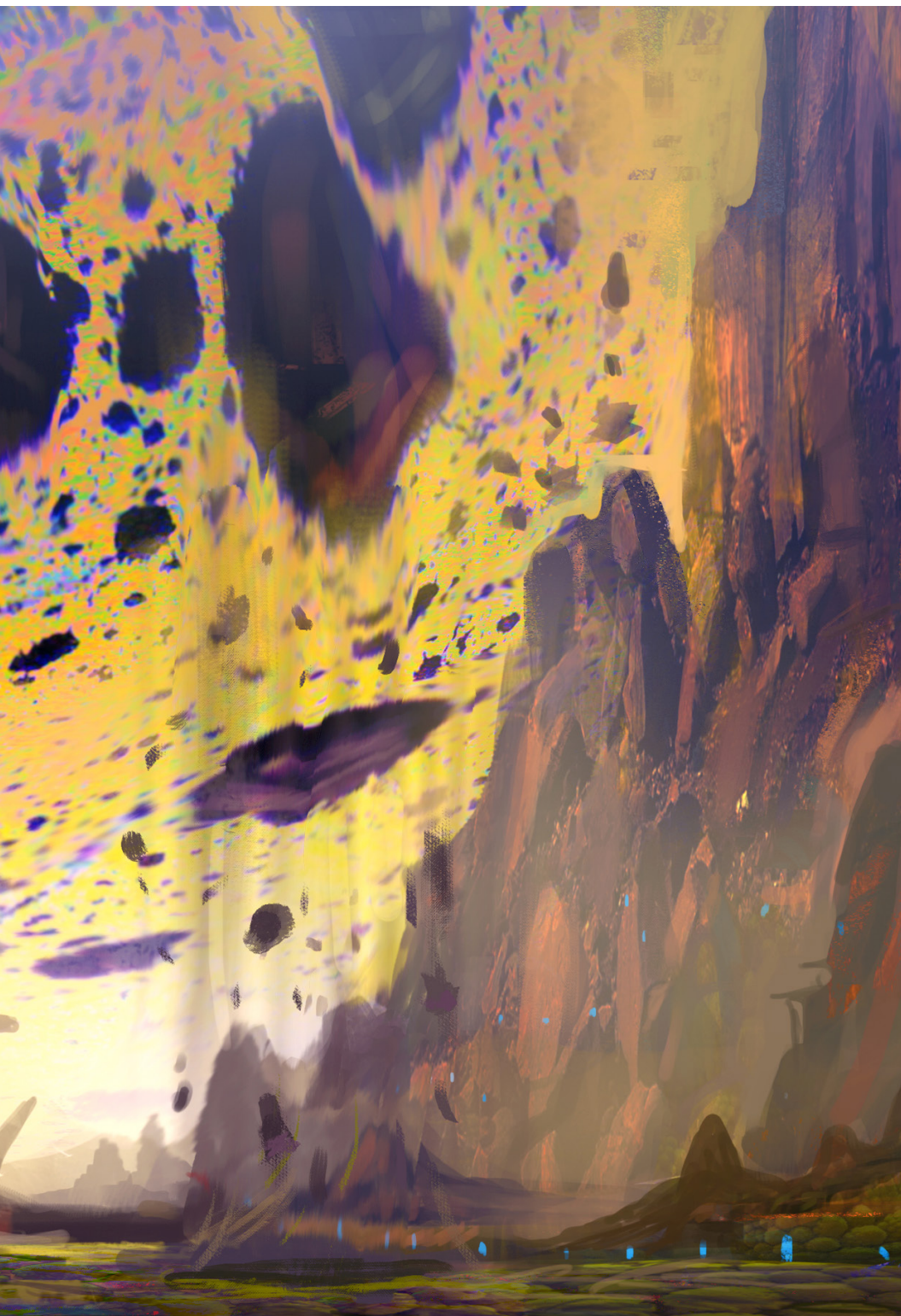
The *Acrobatics* skill represents coordination, balance, agility, and physical fitness.

Overcome: Acrobatics allow you to overcome any obstacle that requires physical movement—jumping, running, climbing, swimming, etc. You also roll Acrobatics to chase or race in relevant contests or challenges.

Create an Advantage: When you're creating an advantage with Acrobatics, you're doing things like jumping to high ground, running faster than an opponent, or performing a series of dazzling maneuvers that confound your foes. Perhaps you discover something interesting by climbing a tree.

Attack: Acrobatics is not an attack skill.





Defend: Acrobatics is the catchall skill to roll for defense in a physical conflict against both close quarters and ranged attacks.

Acrobatics Stunts

All Eyes on Me—once per scene, you can take an additional free action to create an aspect that describes the flashy way you move to become the center of attention.

Bullet Time—get +1 to defense against Blast attacks. If you dodge a Blast attack, you have to provide a kickass description of how you avoided being hit.

The Cat Lands on Its Feet—once per scene, you can reduce by 4 any stress damage that you'd normally take from falling, or from an attack that knocks you back.

Dance Battler (prerequisite: Acrobatics level 3 or higher)—you incorporate elements of dance into your combat maneuvers, making it hard for a foe to get a read on you. Add 2 stress to any damage you do with Combat Arts.

Double Jump—receive +2 to any attempt to ascend. You can also leap as high as your own height as an uncontested action.

Implausible Backflip—gain +1 to defense against Combat Arts attacks.

Summon Backup Dancers—anytime you dance, people nearby are irresistibly drawn to participate. In addition to this being cool and fun, you can use Acrobatics when attempting to create relevant advantages for social contests.



Blast

Blast is the skill of using ranged weaponry, both personal arms and ships' weapons.

Overcome: While you don't often use *Blast* in a non-conflict situation, there are occasions when you might—for example, using a ship's cannon to remove a boulder blocking a cave entrance without causing a tunnel collapse. Marksmanship contests (another nonaggressive use of *Blast*) are familiar in adventure fiction.

Create an Advantage: In physical conflicts, *Blast* can be used to perform a wide variety of moves, like trick shots, keeping someone under heavy fire, and similar maneuvers. You could also create aspects based on your knowledge of weapons (like remembering that the laser pistol an opponent is using is prone to misfiring in the cold).

Attack: This is the skill you use to make attacks at a distance.

Defend: *Blast* doesn't have a defense component to it—you use *Acrobatics* for that. You could use it to lay down some cover fire—but that would be represented as creating an advantage.

Blast Stunts

Augmented Focus—for any *Blast* attack roll, the first advantage an opponent uses to counter you only does one shift of damage.

I'll Cover You—this allows you to optionally forfeit your attack roll in order to provide an additional defense roll for an ally by using your *Blast* skill. You don't take a consequence from a failed defense.

Pew! Pew! Pew!—once per combat, when you inflict a consequence on an opponent, you may also inflict the same consequence on a second opponent for the cost of 1 fate point.

Plasma Weapons Are Messy—when you successfully blast an opponent, they gain the aspect "On Fire." If they weren't already "On Fire," you gain a free invocation.

Stay on Target!—once per session, chose a single opponent, and stack an additional free invocation on any advantage you create against them.

Trick Shooting—you get +2 to *Blast* when it's used in contests or competitions. This stunt can also be used outside of combat to create an advantage meant to demonstrate your talent with ranged weapons.

Zap! Pow!—get +2 to use *Blast* and create advantages in combat.

Combat Arts

The *Combat Arts* cover all forms of close quarters conflict—both unarmed and using weapons. For ranged weapons, see Blast.

Overcome: Combat Arts are rarely used to overcome obstacles outside of a melee. However, you might employ karate to break a board.

Create an Advantage: Combat Arts can be used to create advantages in a physical conflict such as striking to stun, hitting blow the belt, etc.

You could even use Combat Arts to assess another fighter's style, spotting weaknesses in his or her form that you can then exploit.

Attack: This is self-explanatory. You make physical attacks with Combat Arts, provided you are close enough to engage with your target.

Defend: You can use Combat Arts to defend yourself against other melee attacks. Likewise, you can use your Combat Arts to thwart an adversary who is attempting to use their Combat Arts skill to gain an advantage on you.

Combat Arts Stunts

Backstabber—get +2 to melee attacks delivered when you're behind your opponent.

DPS (damage per second)—when in combat, you can choose to add +2 to your melee attacks. The cost of using this stunt is that your opponent can inflict an additional +2 of stress on you if their attacks hit you. You can decide to use DPS when it's your turn in combat; the effect lasts until your next turn, when you may decide to use it again.

Glass Cannon—after you succeed in inflicting a consequence on your foe using a melee attack, you can choose to take a consequence yourself, this forces your opponent to take a second consequence.

Now You've Made Me Mad—gain +2 to melee attacks after an opponent has caused a consequence against you in this combat.

Peace Bonded—your nonviolent attacks are very productive. You can add +1 to all your attacks with Combat Arts; however, any consequences you inflict can be recovered at the end of a scene, provided the target has a chance to rest.

Tank—if you succeed in attacking an opponent in melee combat,



you gain +1 to your defense against their next attack.

Training Montage—once per session you can prepare for your next combat by gaining +1 to all Combat Arts skill checks in that scene.

Cosplay

Cosplay is your character's aptitude for self-presentation using costuming, genetic modification, posture, and movement. Thanks to centuries of refinement, it is considered a fine art in the systems of the Convention Authority.

Special: Cosplay involves granular genetic control of your body. Accordingly, it is the skill you can use to recover from physical consequences. You can also use it at a -2 penalty to help others recover.

Overcome: Cosplay is the skill you use for determining if a costume used as a disguise works.

For cosplay competitions, successful performances win more awards and recognition the higher the level of difficulty they achieve.

Create an Advantage: You can perform Cosplay to create distractions in combat, thanks to your knowledge of stage fighting. Perhaps your Cosplay performance "Catches the Conscience of the King" allows you to discover your opponent's part in some wrong-



doing, even if you can't prove their guilt.

A character succeeding at Cosplay can document the costume they wearing with an aspect.

Attack: Cosplay isn't used for attacks.

Defend: Cosplay isn't used to defend.

Cosplay Stunts

Dammit, I AM a Doctor—you don't suffer a -2 penalty on attempts to help others recover from consequences. Also, it's likely that your parents are very proud of you.

Dress for Success—you understand the power of FASHION! Once per session, you can don appropriate garb and use Cosplay in the place of the Networking skill.

Glitter Gun—you can use Cosplay instead of Blast to make ranged attacks at targets within four meters. If you achieve a success with style, the target receives the aspect "Shiny," and you get a free invocation of that aspect.

I Don't Even Lift, Bro—your genetic enhancements allow you to temporarily juice your metabolism; once per scene, you can use Cosplay instead of Might.

Make It Work—you can use Cosplay in the place of Making to create, fix, or use personal items that are part of your costume.

Pretty Little Liar—your skill as a performer allows you to use Cosplay in an attempt to deceive a minor NPC (such as a guard or a hireling).

Suspension of Disbelief—once per session, you can take +2 to any roll where a character you're cosplaying as would have an advantage.

Empathy

Empathy involves understanding and being able to spot changes in a person's mood or bearing.

Overcome: You don't typically use Empathy to overcome obstacles directly—normally, you find out some information with it, and then use it in roleplaying or follow it with another skill attempt. In some cases, though, you might use Empathy to see if you spot a change in someone's attitude or intent.

Create an Advantage: You can use Empathy to read a person's emotional state and get a general sense of who they are,

presuming the two of you have an interpersonal connection. You can use this to assess the aspects on another character's sheet, and sometimes you might use it discover a new aspect; for example, you might learn that a guard is "Conflicted About Serving a Tyrant." If the target realizes that you're trying to read them, they can defend with Will.

Attack: Empathy isn't used this way.

Defend: Empathy isn't normally used for defense.

Empathy Stunts

Breaking Pointers—if you're interacting with someone, you know when things are getting out of control. In these circumstances, you can take one action before combat formally begins.

Casting Call—you get +2 to any contests and competitions in which you've engaged NPCs to assist you.

I Sense Something, Captain . . .— you don't suffer any penalties when using Empathy at a distance through video or audio transmissions or even recordings.

I've Got a Bad Feeling about This (prerequisite: Empathy level 3 or higher)—when the GM compels a character aspect against you, you earn an extra fate point at the end of the current scene.

Machine Empathy—you can use Empathy to diagnose issues with technology.

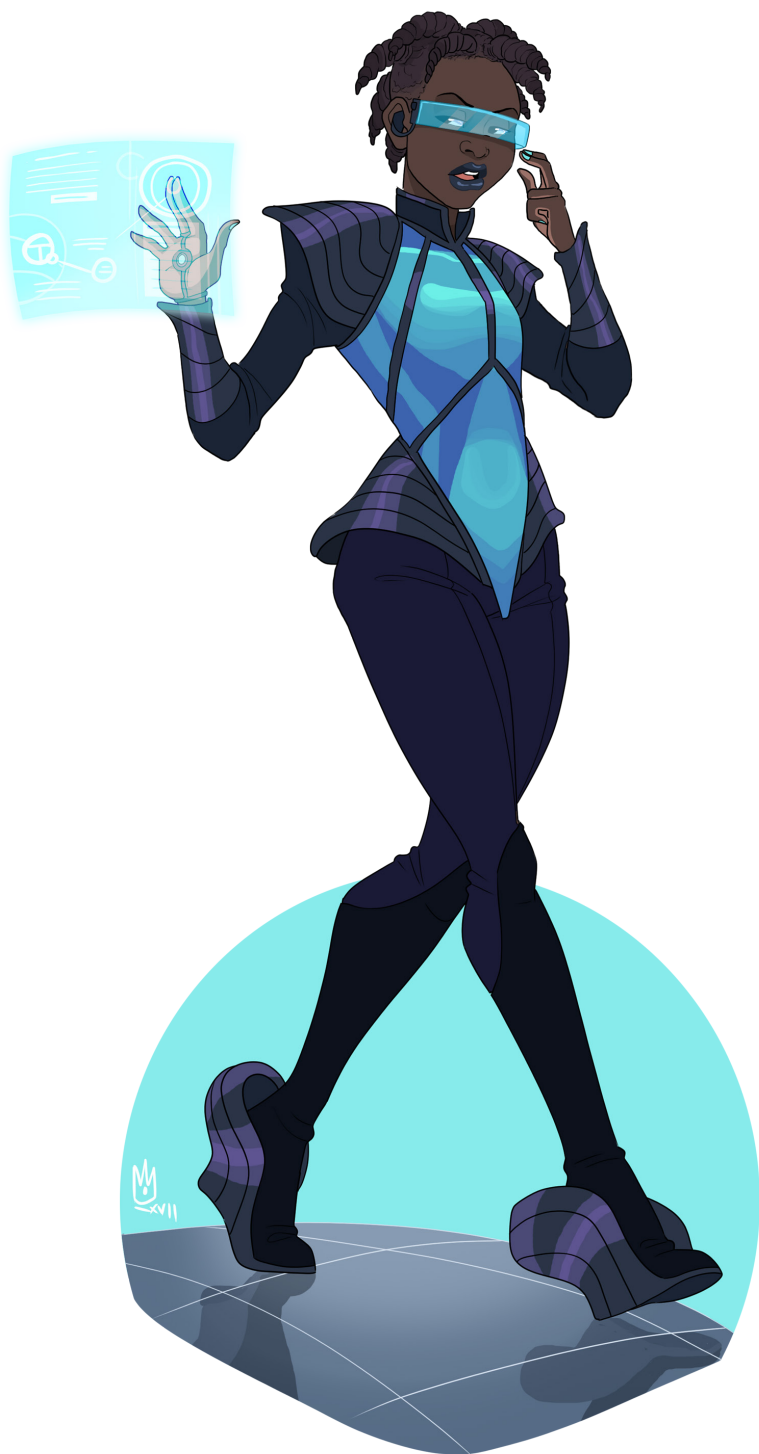
Nonverbal Communication—you're so in tune with your companions that you can communicate moderately complex concepts without speaking.

Reading the Crowd—receive +2 to Empathy rolls made in front of an audience to whom you are speaking or performing.

Intrusion

The *Intrusion* skill allows you to avoid detection and get into things you aren't granted access to. It includes physically moving about unseen, avoiding sensors and surveillance, and slicing unobtrusively into a computer system.

Overcome: You can use Intrusion to get past any situation that primarily depends on you not being noticed. Examples include sneaking past sentries and security, hiding from a pursuer, and avoiding leaving identifying traces when you access a database.





Create an Advantage: You might use Intrusion to create aspects on yourself, setting yourself in an ideal position for an attack or ambush in a conflict. That way, you can be “Well-Hidden” when the guards pass by, or use “Hard to Pin Down” if you’re fighting in the dark.

Attack: Intrusion isn’t used to make attacks.

Defend: You can use Intrusion to foil an adversary’s Scan attempts to pinpoint you or seek you out.

Intrusion Stunts

Black-Tie Infiltration—you can use Intrusion instead of Cosplay to create a disguise that will help you blend in at an event, rather than stand out.

Catsuit (prerequisite: Intrusion level 3 or higher)—you wear form-fitting black armor that reduces any stress you take in a combat exchange by one shift. (You certainly didn’t think this was going to make you less noticeable, did you?)

Eight ICE Queens—get +2 to attempts to overcome computer security with Intrusion.

Follow Me, and Be Quiet—you can make an Intrusion roll for your group at -2 your Intrusion level. This allows the entire party to escape notice, so that less skilled comrades don’t ruin everything with their clumsiness. As a bonus, you don’t have to split the party, which never ends well!

Saboteur—receive +2 to attempts to use Intrusion to wreck machines or systems.

Silent Running—you can use the Intrusion skill to defend your ship in space combat, provided your craft isn’t attacking in this exchange.

Sniper—get +2 to create stealth advantages that can only be used for your Blast skill.

Making

Making is the art of building, fixing, and working with machines of varying technological levels. This art dates back to the 21st century, evolving from the fabrication of replica weapons for cosplay into a separate competition involving the re-creation of machinery, robots, and starships from fiction. While Making is highly regarded as a cultural form and means of self-expression, it also

encompasses the use and construction of the technology that underpins day-to-day life.

Unlike, say, an engineer in the 21st century, a skilled maker will have deep vocational knowledge of antiquated technologies. Indeed, steam engines, clockwork mechanisms, and rocket science, while having few modern applications, are some of the most avidly followed categories of Making competitions.

Special: Making is the skill you can use to repair a starship from the physical consequences of space combat.

Overcome: Making allows you to build, break, or fix machinery, assuming you have the time and tools you need.

It is also used for maker cultural competitions. Successful performances win more awards and recognition when they achieve higher levels of difficulty.

Create an Advantage: You can use Making to create aspects representing features of a piece of machinery, pointing out useful features or strengths you can use to your advantage ("Armor-Plated," "Rugged Construction"), or to identify vulnerabilities for you to exploit ("Flaw in the Crossbeam," "Hasty Work"). You might use Making to assess and discover the functionality of an unfamiliar object.

Attack: Making is not used for attack.

Defend: Neither is Making is used for defense.

Making Stunts

Bending the Laws of Physics—whenever you succeed in creating an advantage for a starship using your Making skill, you succeed with style.

Bricolage—get +1 to all attempts to create or repair using unlikely materials. You must provide an amusing description of how the unusual items are used.

First Law of Robotics Fight Club—you can use Making at +2 in the place of Combat Arts when you are attacking a robot, android, drone, or artificial intelligence in melee combat.

Human Resources Worries—you know this stuff is dangerous, and you gain +2 to attack in fights that take place in industrial or manufacturing settings: workshops, factories, foundries, etc.

She Cannae Take Anymore—by giving your starship a consequence, you can boost any one player's skill rolls for operating

the starship. This bonus is equal to the number of shifts that the consequence can absorb.

Sonic Hammer—you have a small, inconspicuous crafting tool that can be used for an absurd number of tasks. You never need to spend a fate point to declare that you have the proper tools for a particular job using Making—even in extreme situations (like being imprisoned). That source of opposition is just off the table. Be sure to describe this tool for the other players, maybe even giving it a pet name.

Trojan Bot—this allows you to use Making instead of Cosplay to disguise yourself as a robot or a mechanical creature.

Might

Might represents raw strength and endurance.

Special: The Might skill gives you additional physical stress or consequence slots. A skill level of 1 or 2 gives you a 3-point stress box. A skill level of 3 or 4 gives you a 3-point and a 4-point stress box. Skill levels of 5 and above give you an additional mild consequence slot along with the additional stress boxes.

Overcome: You can use Might to overcome obstacles that require the application of brute force—most often to overcome a situation aspect on a zone—or any other physical impediment, like prison bars or locked gates. Of course, Might is the classic skill for arm wrestling matches and other contests of applied strength, as well as marathons or other endurance-based challenges.

Create an Advantage: Might has a lot of potential for advantages in physical conflict, usually related to grappling and holding someone in place, making them “Pinned” or “Locked Down.”

Attack: Might is not used to harm people directly—see the Combat Arts skill for that.

Defend: You don’t generally use Might to defend against attacks.

Might Stunts

Gentle Giant—you can use Might instead of Networking when you use your physical strength to assist innocent civilians.

Overpower (prerequisite: Might level 3 or higher)—when you succeed with style in a Combat Arts attack on a human-sized opponent (or smaller), you may knock them to the ground, creating the advantage “Prone” with one free invocation.



Person of Steel—reduce any damage you take by one shift.

See the Amazing Feats of Strength!—get +2 to Might rolls used in competitions or contests.

Torn Shirt—you can use Might in the place of Networking in romantic situations.

Well-Oiled—gain +2 when resisting an opponent's attempts to wrestle, grapple, or delay you physically.

You Wouldn't Like Me When I'm Angry—spend a fate point to gain a bonus to a melee Combat Arts roll. This bonus is equal to the value of a consequence you've suffered during this combat.

Networking

Networking is the ability to make connections with people and to communicate both in person and via communication technology.

Overcome: You use Networking to overcome obstacles to establishing communication or friendlier relations with a person or group.

Create an Advantage: Networking allows you to identify the perfect person to talk to for anything you might need. It's likely that you'll create story details with this skill, represented by aspects. ("Hey, guys, everyone says that Balaga is the 'Best Pilot in the System.'")

Networking can also be used to discover (or publicize) information and rumors about people.

Attack: Networking isn't used for attacks.

Defend: Networking can be used to defend against attempts to spread rumors about your character.

Networking Stunts

Hailing Frequencies Open—you can use Networking instead of Making to operate, build, or fix any technologies related to communication.

I'll Form the Head—receive +2 to Social Influence rolls when you're attempting to exert leadership.

Mission Control—you can create advantages using any of your skills for other players when your character isn't present but can still communicate remotely. The difficulty of the required roll isn't increased even though you aren't physically there.

Not My First Contact—you get +2 to overcome obstacles in establishing communication with a civilization previously unknown to your society.

O Captain! My Captain!—enjoy +2 to Networking in romantic situations.

Rumormonger—you earn +2 to create an advantage when you plant rumors about someone else.

We Happy Few—once per combat, you can deliver an inspiring speech that boosts your side's morale. Roll with Networking against a difficulty of 2, and create a stress box equal to this roll's result. Anyone on your side who has heard the speech can tap this stress box to absorb their stress. The stress box disappears at the end of the combat, even if it isn't used.

Piloting

The *Piloting* skill is all about flying spaceships and driving other vehicles and making them go fast.

When you are Piloting a vehicle that's significant in the story, the gamemaster may give you a character sheet to represent it. As a pilot, you may be called upon to use your Piloting skills to help the vessel avoid damage. Other party members who crew the vessel might use their Blast skills to fire the ship's weapons, or their Scan skills to employ its sensors to create an advantage.

Overcome: Piloting is used to navigate in the face of difficult circumstances such as steering through an asteroid field, dealing with unfamiliar hyperspatial phenomenon, or stunt flying. Obviously, Piloting is the skill you'd use in contests like chases and races.

Create an Advantage: You can use Piloting to determine the best course toward a destination. A good enough roll might allow you to learn features of the route that get expressed as aspects; for example, to declare that you know a "Way through the Nebula."

Attack: Piloting isn't usually used as an attack skill in space combat (see Blast), but planetside you might use it to represent an attempt to overrun an opponent with a vehicle. If you want to ram another vehicle, you can attack with Piloting, but you will take the same shifts of harm that you inflict.

Defend: Evading damage in space combat is one of the most common uses of Piloting. You can also use it to defend against advantages being created against you.

Piloting Stunts

Barnstorming—get +2 to Piloting rolls in competitions and contests where trick flying would be useful.

Go to Lightspeed—receive +2 to Piloting rolls made while trying to escape an opponent.

I've Sim'd This—you never suffer penalties for flying or driving an unfamiliar craft.

Hand Me That Celestial Spanner—you can use Piloting instead of Making to maintain or repair a vehicle.

Instincts of an Ace—this stunt allows you to reroll one Piloting skill check per scene.

Launch Sequence—you get +2 to your first piloting roll in a scene.

Trick Maneuver—when you succeed with style in evading damage, your opponent takes one shift of damage.

Scan

Scan is the skill you use to notice things and people in the environment around you, either through direct observation or thorough the use of technology like ships' sensors and probes.

In combat, those with higher *Scan* skills have a chance to take an action before players with lower levels.

Overcome: You don't often use *Scan* to overcome obstacles. Very occasionally, it can be used to notice something in a scene, such as spotting the concealed ray gun in the cummerbund of a guest at an embassy party.

Scan rolls to overcome should rarely be used, and only when succeeding or failing would result in interesting circumstances. It is very important for gamemasters to avoid asking for *Scan* rolls when nothing happens if the roll is failed. This can bog down the story horribly. If a GM has a player make a *Scan* roll to overcome, and the player fails, but nothing of note happens as a result of the player's failure, the player can demand an extra fate point from the gamemaster. If this happens more than once in session, everyone should feel free to gently mock the GM.

Create an Advantage: You use *Scan* to create aspects based on direct observation—looking over a room for details that stand out, finding an escape route in a debris-strewn building, noticing someone who sticks out in a crowd, etc. When you're watching people, *Scan* can tell you what it is they are doing; to gauge their feelings, see *Empathy*. You might also use *Scan* to declare that your character spots something you can use to your advantage in a sit-

uation. Such as a convenient “Escape Route” when you’re trying to get out of a building, or a “Subtle Weakness” in the enemy’s line of defense. For example, if you’re in a barroom brawl, you could make a Scan roll to say that you spot a puddle on the floor, right next to your opponent’s feet that could cause him to slip.

On occasion, a gamemaster might substitute a different created aspect, to provide the players with an added bonus of information that they might not otherwise receive. This can work especially well in scenes involving scientific puzzles or when the party is investigating a mystery.

Attack: Scan isn’t really used for attacks.

Defend: You can use Scan to defend against any uses of Intrusion against you, or to discover that you’re being observed

Scan Stunts

Body Language—you can use Scan in the place of Empathy to attempt to learn a target’s aspects through observation.

Continuity Error—get +2 to all Scan attempts in scenes where someone is trying to deceive you. This stunt cannot be used unless the player knows, or can reasonably infer, that someone is trying to trick their character.

Copy Editor—receive +2 when you use Scan to create advantages involving written communication.

Great Reflexes (prerequisite: Scan level 3 or higher)—Once per session, you may spend a fate point to cancel a single attack made against you, provided you could see it coming.

Photographic Memory—you can attempt to create advantages with Scan rolls based on your recollections of a past scene in the current scenario.



Through a Scanner, Darkly—you have +2 to create advantages in space combat using Scan.

Was Not Noticing REALLY Going to Be Just as Interesting? (prerequisite: Scan level 3 or higher)—whenever the gamemaster asks you to roll Scan to detect an unknown object or person in the same room or nearby area, you automatically succeed.

Scholarship

The *Scholarship* skill reflects your knowledge and education.

Overcome: You can use Scholarship to overcome any obstacle that requires applying your character's knowledge to achieve a goal. For example, you might roll Scholarship to decipher an ancient language on a tomb wall, under the presumption that your character might have researched it previously.

You can use Scholarship as a go-to skill any time you need to know if your character can answer a difficult question; where tension exists in not knowing the answer.

Create an Advantage: Scholarship provides flexible opportunities to create advantages, provided you can research the subject in question. More often than not, you'll be using Scholarship to get a story detail or to recall some obscure bit of information that you uncover or know already. As that information may give you an edge in a future scene, it can take the form of an aspect. Likewise, you can use it to create advantages based on any subject matter your character might have studied, which gives you a fun way to add details to the setting.

Attack: Scholarship is not used in conflicts.

Defend: Nor is it used to defend.

Scholarship Stunts

The Glasses Come Off—once per session, at the cost of a fate point, you can attack throughout a scene using your Scholarship skill at +1 in the place of either Blast or Combat Arts.

Militarized Archeology (prerequisite: have archeology as a specialization, or have "Archeologist" as an aspect)—receive +1 to all rolls taken while exploring an ancient ruin.

Research Montage—you can use your Scholarship skill to quickly accomplish tasks that'd normally require extensive investigation or research—even when a library or archive isn't available. You must explain how you came to research this topic in the past.

Rules Lawyer—get +2 to Scholarship rolls involving games, contests, or religious rituals you find yourself shanghaied into.

Specialist—choose a field of specialization, such as history, biology, or hyperspace theory. You'll earn a +2 to all Scholarship rolls relating to that field of specialization.

Spring Break—you can use Scholarship in the place of any other social skill, but you may not use Scholarship normally for the remainder of the session unless you pay a fate point.

Unfortunate Grad Student (prerequisite: Scholarship level 3 or higher)—you have a research assistant who can be employed to perform menial tasks. They can also be used to absorb 2 points of stress per session.

Science

Science is the skill you use to find things out using detailed observations and experiments. When you choose Science as a skill, you should also choose a field of specialization such as biology or astrophysics. You receive +1 to your skill for investigations within your field, and –1 to investigations outside your field. Science also implies a knowledge of scientific literature. You receive +2 to attempts to recall existing knowledge within your specialization, and –2 for other branches of science.

Overcome: Science obstacles are all about information that's hard to uncover for one reason or another. Examples can include uncovering the cause of a disease, understanding when a supernova is likely to explode, or scrutinizing a crime scene for clues.

Racing against the clock to analyze evidence before disaster ensues is a classic way to use Science in a challenge.

Science isn't used by itself to create devices, the Making skill does that.

Create an Advantage: Science is a versatile way to create an advantage. As long as you're willing to take the time, you can discover nearly any detail about a place, object, or phenomenon. Likewise, you could make up aspects about nearly anything in the game world that your character could reasonably discover.

Attack: Science isn't normally used to make attacks. However, occasionally in a space opera game, a character might use science to, say, repurpose an array of solar satellites to attack a giant space amoeba.

Defend: Science isn't typically used to defend, but again there may be occasions when it might be used that way in a space opera.

Science Stunts

I Am Not Spock (prerequisite: Science level 3 or higher)—the beloved hyperrational, stoic character looms too large in the public imagination, crowding out other representations of scientists. Once per session, gain +2 to any roll, so long as your attempted action would be out of character for Spock.

Peer Review (prerequisite: Science level 3 or higher)—once per session, you may remove or rename a situational aspect as a free action, explaining why it isn't actually true, even if it may have appeared to be so.

Polymath—you're interested in everything, and receive no bonuses or penalties to your Science skill based on your lack of a field of specialization.

Science Genius Girl (prerequisite: Polymath)—the theorems speak to you. You receive bonuses in your field of specialization.



Technobabble—once per session, you can use your scientific knowledge to automatically persuade or deceive a minor NPC when they can't evaluate your bogus, but plausible sounding explanation.

That's Funny—once per session, you can use Science to succeed at a Scan attempt that you failed on. Create an aspect with a free invocation that describes the scientific anomaly that drew your attention.

White Lab Coat—get +1 to Science skill rolls which are used to benefit a whole society.

Self-Control

The *Self-Control* skill represents your character's general level of mental and spiritual fortitude in the same way that *Might* represents your character's physical fortitude. *Self-Control* is associated with disciplines involving mindfulness, and characters with high skill levels are very attuned to their emotions, but are not prone to act impulsively on them.

Special: *Self-Control* helps characters stay composed in distressing situations. Having *Self-Control* at +2 gives you an extra 2-point stress box. In addition, a +4 or higher level gives you an extra 4-point stress box, in addition to the 2-point box already mentioned.

Overcome: You can use *Self-Control* to pit yourself against obstacles that require mental effort. Puzzles and riddles can fall under this category, as well as any mentally absorbing task, such as deciphering a code. *Self-Control* makes it possible to overcome temptations, or to alleviate physical distress. *Self-Control* might be made part of a challenge, to reflect the effort involved.

Create an Advantage: You can use *Self-Control* to place aspects on yourself, representing a state of deep concentration or focus.

Attack: *Self-Control* isn't used for attacks.

Defend: *Self-Control* isn't used for defense.

Self-Control Stunts

Acting without Expectations (prerequisite: *Doing Not Doing*)—for one skill roll per session, you can receive +3 per fate point you spend to improve a roll, rather than the normal +2.

Doing Not Doing (prerequisite: *Knowing Yourself Is True*)

Strength)—skip your action this turn in combat. On the action you take in the next exchange, you can turn any -1 results on your die roll into to +1 results.

Ignore Injuries (prerequisite: Self-Control 3 or higher)—As an action in combat, you can remove any free invocations on consequences you've suffered.

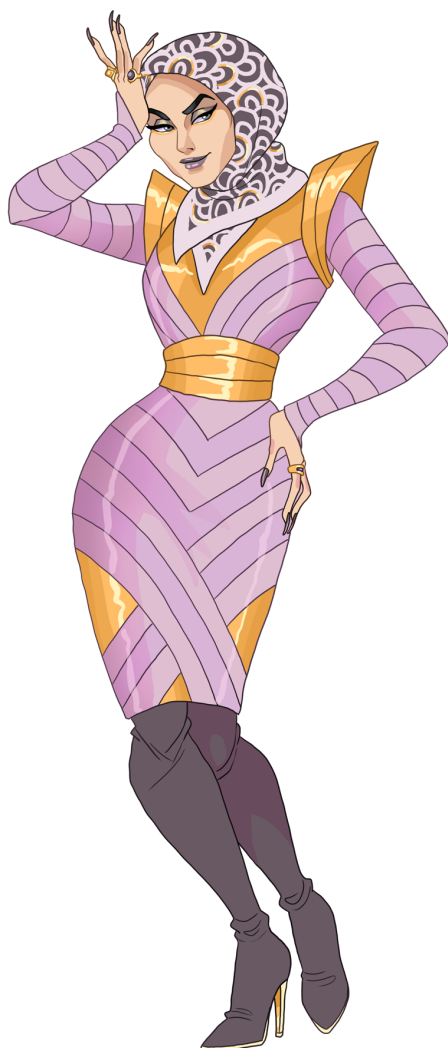
Karma, Bitch (prerequisite: one other Self-Control stunt)—once per combat, you can redirect an attack against you back at the attacker instead.

Knowing Yourself Is True Strength—you can control your heart rate, feign death, and go for improbable periods of time without food, water, or sleep.

Lifelong Yogi—this stunt allows you to use Self-Control in the place of Acrobatics when flexibility can achieve the desired result.

Stoic—once per scene, you can resist a compel on a character aspect without paying a fate point.





Social Influence

In the post-scarcity setting of this game, money doesn't exist. Nevertheless, there are objects that are rare (such as artwork), and people with specialized skills and limited time. Social Influence is the rough equivalent of wealth and resources. It often involves the trading of favors and facilitation of connections. When your character is exploring, and they encounter a new civilization which has more traditional forms of wealth, Social Influence represents your character's fluidity in understanding what people in that society find valuable.

Overcome: You can use the skill to get yourself out of—or past—any situation where applying influence would help, such as removing a legal obstacle or acquiring rare items.

Create an Advantage: You might use Social Influence to grease the wheels and make people pleasanter. You can also use the skill to declare that you have something you need on hand, or can quickly acquire it, which could give you an aspect representing the object.

Attack: Social Influence isn't used for attacks.

Defend: Nor is it used to defend.

Social Influence Stunts

Bag of Holding—even in remote areas, which are distant from your social network, you can make Social Influence rolls to create advantages related to having in your possession a useful item that “someone happened to have given me.”

Black Market Baby—you suffer no penalties to Social Influence rolls to because an item is illegal or immoral.

Famous . . . on the Holonet—get +1 to Social Influence attempts both online and in virtual reality. Also, once per session, in the real world, you can create the aspect “I Have No Idea Who You Are” on yourself with one free invocation.

Fetch Quest—once per session, you can automatically have any NPC tell you exactly what they want in exchange for something you want, assuming there's anything they'd be willing to trade for what you desire.

Insert Coin to Continue (prerequisite: Social Influence level 3 or higher)—when you pay a fate point to reroll the dice, you can opt to leave one die as it was originally rolled.

Pecking, Ordered—when in an unfamiliar social setting, you can immediately understand the power structures involved.

Social Capital—you can use Social Influence in the place of Networking in communication over online or mass media.

Money is a sign of poverty.
Iain M. Banks

Survival

The *Survival* skill allows you to thrive in nature, no matter how hostile the environment: underwater, frigid climes, etc. It also encompasses using equipment in alien environments (e.g. going on a spacewalk).

Overcome: You can use Survival to overcome an environmental obstacle such as lack of food or water. You can also use it instead of Acrobatics to climb a mountain or tree.

Create an Advantage: You can create or uncover advantages related to the natural environment, or to create advantages such as traps.

Attack: Survival isn't used to attack.

Defend: Survival isn't used to defend.

Survival Stunts

Animal Instincts—when you're in a natural environment, you can use Survival at +2 instead of Scan to determine the order of conflict resolution.

Dead Reckoning (prerequisite: Survival level 2 or higher)—your character always knows where they're located on a planet.

Eco . . . Eco . . . Eco . . .—you can use your Survival skill in the place of Science when dealing with ecological matters.

Friend to All Living Creatures—you can use Survival to attempt to create a positive relationship with any animal.

The Great Outdoors (prerequisite: Survival level 2 or higher)—once per session, you may reduce a moderate consequence to a minor one, by luxuriating in the great outdoors.

Recon—you can use Survival instead of Intrusion—but only in a natural environment.

Zero-Gravity Training—you never receive penalties for operating in low or zero-gravity situations.



Advancement & Change

Your characters aren't going to remain static throughout the entire campaign. As their stories play out, they'll have the chance to grow and change. The conflicts they face and the complications they overcome will alter your sense of who they are and push them toward new, harder challenges.

Character advancement in *Return to the Stars* happens at events called milestones. These are significant "break points" in the action of a game—the end of a session, the end of a scenario, and the end of a story arc, which trigger minor, significant, and major milestones respectively.

Minor Milestones

Minor milestones usually occur at the end of a session of play, or when one piece of a story has been resolved. These kinds of milestones are more about changing your character rather than making them more powerful. It's an opportunity to make adjustments in response to whatever's going on in the story if you need to. Sometimes it won't really make sense to take advantage of a minor milestone, but you always have the opportunity to do so.

During a minor milestone, you can choose to do one (and only one) of the following:

- Switch the rank values of any two skills, or replace one (+1) skill with one that isn't on your sheet.
- Change any single stunt for another stunt.
- Purchase a new stunt by spending a point of refresh to do so. (Remember, you can't go below 1 refresh.)
- Rename one character aspect that isn't your high concept.

In addition, you can also rename any moderate consequences you have, so that you can start them on the road to recovery, presuming you haven't already done so.

This is a good way to make slight character adjustments if it seems like something about your character isn't quite right. Perhaps you don't end up using that stunt as often as you thought, or you resolved that "Blood Feud" so it's no longer an appropriate

character aspect. Minor milestones allow small changes that keep your character consistent with the events of play.

It's worth noting that character aspects are true statements that you've chosen to highlight and make mechanically relevant in play. While you can use a milestone to remove an aspect that's no longer true, you can also use it to swap out something that's still true, but no longer immediately relevant in the game. If your character is stranded on an inhabited jungle world, it's perfectly fine to use a milestone to change "Popular Holonet Game Streamer" to "I'll Do Whatever It Takes to Get Home" with the intention of changing it back at a later minor milestone.

Significant Milestones

Significant milestones usually occur at the end of a scenario or the conclusion of a big plot event (or, when in doubt, at the end of every two or three sessions). Unlike minor milestones, significant milestones are chances to learn new things; dealing with problems and challenges have made your character more capable.

In addition to the benefit of a minor milestone, you also gain both of the following:

- One additional skill point, which you can spend to buy a new skill at average (+1) or to increase an existing skill by one rank.
- If you have any severe consequences, you can rename them to begin the recovery process, if you haven't already done so.

There are two limitations to raising your character's skills. First, the number of skills at a higher rating can't exceed the number of skills at lower rating. For example, a starting character has two skills at a +3 rating and three skills at a +2 rating. You can't immediately move a skill from +2 to +3, as that would mean you'd have more skills at a higher rating (+3) than you do at lower ratings (+2). Typically, you'll need to start by adding and promoting lower level skills before you can increase your best skills.

Second, at the start of the campaign, there's a skill cap, initially set at +4. You can't spend skill points to raise a skill above the skill cap. When you hit a Major Milestone, you'll have a chance to raise the skill cap.

You might notice that this means that the more experience you have, the harder it is to quickly advance your skills. This is

intentional—no one is going to be able to get to the point where they're awesome at everything, all the time. That's boring.

Major Milestones

A major milestone should only occur when something happens in the campaign that shakes it up a lot—the end of a story arc (about three scenarios), the death of a main NPC villain, or any other large-scale change that reverberates around your game's world.

These milestones are about gaining more power. The challenges of yesterday simply aren't sufficient to threaten these characters anymore; the threats of tomorrow will need to be more adept, organized, and determined to stand against the characters in the future.

Achieving a major milestone confers the benefits of both a significant milestone and a minor milestone, and all of the following additional options:

- If you have an extreme consequence, rename it to reflect that you've moved past its most debilitating effects. This allows you to take another extreme consequence in the future, if you desire.
- Take an additional point of refresh, which allows you to immediately buy a new stunt or keep it in order to give yourself more fate points at the beginning of game sessions.
- Advance a skill beyond the campaign's current skill cap, if you're able to, thus permanently increasing the skill cap going forward.
- Rename your character's high concept if you desire.

Reaching a major milestone is a pretty big deal. Characters with more stunts are going to have a diverse range of bonuses, making their skills far more beneficial by default. Characters with a higher refresh will have a few more fate points to work with when sessions begin, which means they'll be a bit less reliant on compels.

Note to GMs: when the player characters increase the skill cap, it will necessarily change the way you make opposition NPCs, because you're going to need foes who can match the PCs in terms of base competence so as to provide a worthy challenge. It won't happen all at once, which will give you the chance to introduce more powerful enemies gradually.

Most of all, a major milestone should signal that lots of things in the world of your game have changed. This will partly be reflected in the story, but given the number of chances the PCs have had to revise their aspects in response to events, it wouldn't be surprising if the members of the party have a much different set of priorities and concerns than they had when they started.

Milestones are one mechanical way to create a sense of progress in the game. Gamemasters have storytelling tools as well:

Knowledge is power. Set up a bunch of mysteries and secrets. As players complete tasks and learn, they become more capable. Make this real to players by adding story beats to the campaign that highlight that their characters have improved because they know more. An example might be setting up an early scene where someone takes advantage of a character who is ignorant about something. Later on, that character has grown and now has the chance to get the upper hand on someone else who's trying to trick them because the con artist thinks they don't know the secret.

Aspects can be rewritten to show progress. Someone who starts out as a "Proud Graduate of the Scouts Academy" can later become "Seasoned First Contact Specialist," and then finally become a "Renowned Diplomat." Similarly you can show progression by having a "security bot" be a tough boss monster early in the campaign, then once the group has gotten stronger, you can have a "swarm of security bots" appear as cannon fodder with low skills.

Stuff is true beyond character aspects. The party can gain contacts, reputations, and gratitude as they adventure. They can acquire objects that aren't protected in the same way as character aspects (which are always true) are, but which still exist. Just because something isn't an aspect doesn't mean that it's not real within the narrative or not helpful to the characters. Let it help them.

Chapter Three: Gamemastering



*“An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered;
an adventure is an inconvenience rightly considered.”*

G. K. Chesterton

If you're the gamemaster, then your job is a little different from everyone else's. This section is going to give you a bunch of tools to help you out during play.

The GM's role was discussed in the introduction, but let's take a more detailed look at your unique responsibilities.

Start and End Scenes

You decide definitively when a scene begins and ends. This might not seem like that big a deal, but it is; it means that you're the person primarily responsible for the pacing of each session. If you start scenes too early, it takes hours to get to the main action. If you don't end them soon enough, then they will drag on, and it will take you a long time to get anything significant done.

The players can help you with this, if they're keen on getting to the next bit of action, but sometimes they'll be inclined to spend too much time bantering in character or focusing on minutiae. When that happens, it's your job to step in like a good movie director and say, "I think we've pretty much milked this scene for all it's worth. Let's see what happens next."

Play the World and the NPCs

As the gamemaster, it's your job to decide how everyone and everything in the world responds to what the PCs do, as well as what the PCs' environment is like. If a PC botches a roll, you're the one who decides the consequences. When an NPC attempts to assassinate a PC's friend, you're the one who gets to decide how the NPC goes about it. When the PCs stroll up to a cosplay judge at a competition, you get to choose what kind of day the official is having, what kind of personality they have, and if they think presentation is as important as workmanship. You determine the weather when the PCs land their shuttle on a new planet.



The Convention Authority

Before the loss of the Mars Beacon, which ended galaxy spanning travel for over a century, the Convention Authority was an association of societies that celebrated and preserved speculative popular culture of the 20th and 21st centuries: fantasy, science fiction, and gaming. It was a popular tourist destination, and boasted some of the galaxy's most skilled terraformers.



During the Great Silence, the Convention was able to maintain local interstellar travel, due in to a large and varied fleet of replica early interstellar craft.

In the modern era, the Convention is the most significant political actor in the revealed galaxy both because it has the only shipyard capable of creating new vessels with origami engines, and because of the curious and cosmopolitan nature of its people, steeped in stories of exploration and discovery for generations.

Judge the Use of the Rules

It's also your job to make most of the moment-to-moment decisions about the rules. Most often, you're going to decide when something in the game deserves a roll, what type of action it is (overcome, attack, etc.), and how difficult the roll is. In conflicts, this can get a little more complicated. It could require you to determine if a situation aspect should force someone to make an overcome action, or deciding whether or not a player can justify a particular advantage they're trying to create.

Approach your position as arbiter of the rules by thinking of yourself as "first among equals" in a committee, rather than as an absolute authority. If there's a disagreement on the use of the rules, try encouraging a brief discussion and let everyone talk freely, rather than making a unilateral decision. A lot of times, you'll find that the group is self-policing—if someone tries to throw out a compel that's a real stretch, another player may well bring it up before you do.

Challenges, Contests, and Conflicts

Zooming In on the Action

Most of the time, a single skill roll should be enough to decide how a particular situation in play resolves. You're not obligated to describe actions in a particular timeframe or with a high level of detail when you use a skill. Therefore, you could use a single Acrobatics roll to find out whether you can safely navigate a rock face that will take days to climb, or use that same single skill roll to find out whether you can safely avoid a swiftly falling tree that's about to crush you.

Sometimes, however, you'll be in a situation where you're doing something really climactic and interesting, like pivotal set pieces in a movie or book. When that happens, it's a good idea to zoom in on the action and deal with it using multiple skill rolls; the wide range of dice results will make things really dynamic and surprising. Most fight scenes fall into this category, but you can zoom in on anything that you consider sufficiently important—chases, court trials, cosplay contests, etc.

Here are three ways for you to zoom in on the action: challenges, contests, and conflicts

A **challenge** is a series of overcome actions used to resolve an especially complicated or dynamic situation. Each overcome action uses a different skill to deal with one task or part of the situation; the gamemaster then combines all the individual results into a whole to narrate how the situation resolves. For example, an attempt to fix an underwater sonar array might involve the Survival skill to swim underwater and the Making skill to conduct the repair. Players can attempt to create advantages to help with the skill roles in the challenge. Of course, failing a create advantage attempt would introduce a new complication.

Characters are in a **contest** when they have mutually exclusive goals, but they aren't trying to harm each other directly. Arm wrestling matches, anti-grav speeder races, and public debates are all good examples of contests. When there is a contest, the gamemaster will determine the "sides," what skills are appropriate, and what scene aspects might be in play. A contest proceeds in a series of exchanges. In an exchange, every participant gets to make one skill roll to determine how well they do in that leg of the contest. The participant with the highest roll scores a victory—if they succeed with style, overcoming their closest opponent by 3 or more shifts, they score two victories. If there is a tie for highest result, no one gets a victory, and an unexpected twist occurs. The first participant to achieve three victories wins the contest. During any exchange, you can try to create an advantage before you make your contest roll. If you're targeting another participant, they get to defend normally. If someone can interfere with your attempt, they provide active opposition as normal.



Conflicts are used when you want to zoom in on two (or more) characters trying to directly harm each other.

To run a conflict:

1. Set the scene, describing the environment the conflict takes place in, creating situation aspects, and establishing who's participating and what side they're on.
2. Determine the turn order. Whoever has the highest Scan skill goes first, followed by everyone else in descending skill order. In the event of ties, compare a secondary skill: Piloting for space combat and Acrobatics for personal combat. If things are still tied, player characters act before non-player characters.
3. Start the first exchange:
 - a. On turns where NPCs move, take an action and then resolve it.
 - b. On the player's turn, they take actions, and NPCs defend or respond as necessary.
4. At the end of everyone's turn, start again with a new exchange.

A character only get to make one skill roll on your turn in an exchange, unless they are defending against someone else's action—in which case, they will roll as many times as needed.

A character can even make defend actions on behalf of others, so long as they fulfill two conditions: it has to be reasonable for them to interpose themselves between the attack and its target, and they have to suffer the effects of any failed rolls.

You know the conflict is over when all the characters on one side have conceded or been taken out.

Remember, conflicts are a way of zooming in on the action. If the opposition is trivial, narrate the outcome, don't waste time enacting the inevitable.

What to Do during Play—The Golden Rule

Before going into specifics, here's the most important rule:

Decide what you're trying to accomplish first, then consult the rules to help you do it.

This might seem like common sense, but it is called out because the order is important. In other words, don't look at the rules as a straitjacket or a hard limit on an action. Instead, use them as tools. Your intent, whatever it may be, always takes precedence over the mechanics.

Never let the rules get in the way of what makes narrative sense. If you or the players narrate something in the game, and it makes sense to apply a certain rule outside of the normal circumstances where you would do so, go ahead and apply the rule.

When to Roll Dice

Roll the dice when succeeding or failing at the action could each contribute something interesting to the game.

This is generally pretty easy to figure out in regards to success—the PCs overcome a significant obstacle, win a conflict, or succeed at a goal, which creates fodder for the next event. With failure, however, it's a little more difficult, because it's easy to look at failure in strictly negative terms—you fail, you lose, you don't get what you want. If there's nothing to build on after that failure, play can grind to a halt in a hurry.

The worst, worst thing you can do is have a failed roll where nothing happens—no new knowledge, no new course of action to take, and no change in the situation. That is boring, and it discourages players from investing in failure—something you absolutely want them to do, given how important compels and the concession mechanic are. Do not allow a failed roll to have no consequences.

Make Failure Awesome

If the PCs fail a roll in the game, and you're not sure how to make that interesting, try one of the following ideas.

Blame the Circumstances

The PCs are extremely competent people. Sometimes, the right description can make failure into something dynamic. Instead of narrating that the PC messed things up, blame the failure on something that the PC couldn't have prevented. Perhaps there's a secondary mechanism on that lock that initially looked simple, or the contact didn't show up on time, or mysterious radiation is throwing off the readings.

That way, the PCs still look competent and awesome, even though they don't get what they wanted. More importantly, shifting the blame to the circumstances gives you an opportunity to suggest a new course of action, which allows the failure to create forward momentum in your story. There's a mysterious source of radiation? Where is it coming from; is it dangerous? That way, you don't spend time dwelling on the failure and can move on to something new.

Succeed at a Cost

You can also offer to give the PCs what they want, but at a price—in this case, the failed roll means they weren't able to achieve their goals without consequences.

A minor cost should complicate the PC's life. Like the above suggestion, this focuses on using failure as a means to change up the situation a bit, rather than simply negating whatever the PC wanted. Some suggestions:

Foreshadow some imminent peril. "The lock opens with a soft click, but the same can't be said for the vault door. If they didn't know you were here before, they do now."

Introduce a new wrinkle. "Yes, the station chief is able to put you in touch with a cryptographer who can translate glyphs—a guy named Berthold. You know him, actually, but the last time you saw him was years ago, when he caught you with his wife."

Present the player with a tough choice. "You managed to brace the collapsing ceiling long enough for two of the others to get through safely, but not the rest. Who's it going to be?" Place an aspect on the PC or the scene. "Somehow you manage to land on your feet, but with a 'Twisted Ankle' as a souvenir."

A serious cost does more than complicate the PC's life, or promise something worse to come—it takes a serious toll, right now.

One way you can do this is by taking a minor cost to the next level. Instead of suspecting that a guard heard them open the vault, several guards burst into the room, weapons drawn. Instead of being merely cut off from their allies by a collapsing ceiling, one or more of those allies ends up buried in the debris. Instead of merely having to face an awkward situation with Berthold, he's still furious and out for their blood. Other options could include:

Reinforce the opposition. You might clear one of an NPC's stress boxes, improve one of their skills by one step for the scene, or give them a new aspect with a free invocation.

Bring in new opposition or a new obstacle, such as additional enemies or a situation aspect that worsens the situation.

Delay success. The task at hand will take much longer than expected.

Creating NPCs

You create the NPCs who will oppose the PCs and try to keep them from their goals during your scenarios. You're never obligated to give any NPC a full sheet like the ones the PCs have. Only create

what you need for the encounter. You can add more later.

For minor NPCs all you need is two or three skills based on their role in the scene. Their skills will typically be from +1 to +3 and they might have one or two stress boxes.

A more significant NPC might have a high concept, a trouble, one or more additional aspects, one stunt, and the standard two stress boxes. They should have a handful of skills (say four or five). If they have a skill that entitles them to bonus stress boxes, award those as well. They have one mild consequence and, if you want them to be especially tough, one moderate consequence. Their best skill might exceed that of the PCs if their role is to provide serious opposition.

A major antagonist might have a full character sheet, with a couple of skills 2 points higher than the party's best skills.

How Hard Should Skill Rolls Be?

For active opposition, you don't really need to worry about how hard the roll is—just use the NPC's skill level and roll the dice like the players do, letting the chips fall where they may.

For passive opposition, you have to decide what number the player has to beat. It's more an art than a science, but here are some guidelines to help you.

Anything that's two or more steps higher than the PC's skill level means that the player will probably fail or need to invoke aspects to succeed.

Anything that's two or more steps lower than the PC's skill level means that the player will probably not need to invoke aspects and that they'll have a good chance of succeeding with style.

Between that range, there's a roughly equal chance that they'll tie or succeed, and a roughly equal chance that they will or won't need to invoke aspects to do so.

Therefore, low difficulties are best when you want to give the PCs a chance to show off and be awesome. Adversities with difficulties near their own skill levels are best when you want to provide tension, but not overwhelm the players. High difficulties are best when you want to emphasize how dire or unusual the circumstances are and make them pull out all the stops.

Finally, a couple of quick axioms:

If nothing about the opposition sticks out, then the difficulty doesn't need to be more than a +1.

If you can think of at least one reason why the opposition sticks out, but otherwise can't decide what the difficulty should be, pick +2. It's in the middle of a PC's range of skills, so it provides a decent challenge for every skill level except +4, and you want to give PCs a chance to show off their very best skills anyway.

Game Time

Here are the conventions used to describe game play:

Exchange: The amount of time it takes all participants in a conflict to take a turn, which includes doing an action and responding to any action taken against them.

Scene: The amount of time it takes to resolve a conflict, deal with a single prominent situation, or accomplish a goal. Scenes vary in length, from a minute or two if it's only a quick description and some dialogue, to a half hour or more in the case of a major set piece battle against a main NPC.

Session: The sum total of all the scenes you run through in a single sitting. A session ends when you and your friends pack it up for the night and go home. A minor milestone usually occurs after a session. Milestones are a way player characters can evolve and grow stronger. Milestones and character advancement will be covered in the full rules.

Scenario: One or more sessions of play, but usually no more than four. Most of the time, the sessions that make up a scenario will definitively resolve some kind of problem or dilemma presented by the GM, or wrap up a storyline. A significant milestone usually occurs at the end of a scenario. You can look at this like an episode of a television show, or a module in Dungeons & Dragons—the number of sessions it takes to tell one story. We've included two scenarios, *Bringing Fire* and *Rouge One*, with these rules.

Arc: Several scenarios, usually between two and four. Similar to a season of a television show, an arc typically culminates in an event that brings great change to the game world. Major milestones usually happen at the end of an arc.

Gamemastering Advice

Generally, the game rewards proactive play. In conflict you want to encourage new players to attack and create advantages to help their teammates. Winning a conflict is great. But conceding a conflict is also great, because you get fate points to be awesome later, and setbacks are part of stories. Grinding endlessly in conflicts isn't particularly cool. New players will sometimes just endlessly attack rather than creating advantages that would help them hit hard. Intervene by reminding them to create aspects, and by showing them NPCs doing so.

Don't encourage defensive play. An NPC that hits hard is almost always better than one that's tough and drags a combat scene out simply because it can take a lot of damage.

Failing to overcome challenges is common in the game, dying is not. This is by design. Sometimes this trips up players used to other role-playing games, where the common result of not constantly winning is death. A well-functioning fate point economy results in a natural series of ups and downs like a well-crafted story.

The rules allow gamemasters to have NPCs concede; however, that doesn't mean that doing so is necessarily the best option. If the players invest significant effort to take out an opponent, that's a strong indication that they don't want to hear about them anymore. It may well be the case that "your nemesis vanishes in a puff of smoke" is a worse story than "the fearsome space pirate pays the wages of sin and dies, but will the party's wounds hamper them in the next chapter of their adventures?" Always be ready to kill your darling NPCs.

When you are creating an aspect, the temptation can be to come up with a startlingly evocative description. Yet at the end of the day, aspects are tools to accomplish something in the game. A good aspect is clear to everyone at the table and comes up in play often, for good and ill. A straightforward if longwinded aspect that accomplishes this is just as good as a pithy, evocative one. If the "aesthetic" aspect happens to be less clear or less actionable, it's a worse aspect. There are no points for style.

Chapter Four : Advanced Rules



Character Arcs

Often in fiction, a protagonist has a problematic way of interacting with the world. It kinda works for them, but this shadow side takes a toll, which they are initially in denial about. Eventually, they learn they need to change. They challenge their belief system and grow personally, and thematically this self-conquest is often echoed in the story by the defeat of antagonist.

In the game, character arcs are a structured way to spotlight how someone grows past a trouble.

A *character arc* is a collaboration between a player and the GM, and both people will need to take on some extra work. If you're a player interested in evolving your character with an arc, reach out to the gamemaster so she can determine a good time to start incorporating a character arc into the broader narrative.

Bear in mind that a character arc is only one way that a character can change, you can certainly look at other literary and cinematic models, and you can accomplish a lot by using the rules for aspect changes during character advancement at milestones. Using rules for character arcs helps you accomplish the sort of theme-based evolution that frequently occurs in pop culture, but it would be a mistake to reduce all storytelling about personal change down to a single formula, like an unskilled wannabe screenwriter.

There are three steps to creating a character arc in the game:

- Preparation—decide what the character needs to learn and, if needed, refine the character's trouble.
- Subplot—the character's flaw is examined in play across multiple scenes, it increasingly comes to dominate their life.
- Transformation—the character's trouble is replaced by a new aspect, they have the chance to demonstrate their self-knowledge by being awesome in a scene.

Preparation

The purpose of the character arc is to show the struggle of a PC to realize a truth and move beyond being dominated by their trouble.

To do this successfully, you'll need to decide what the truth is that the character must learn in the *preparation* phase. This truth

will be expressed as a new aspect replacing the trouble at the transformation which occurs at the end of the character arc.

To make a compelling story, you may need to dig a bit deeper into the trouble, and refine how you describe it. Often it is good idea to identify a false belief that underlies the character's dysfunctional fixation on their trouble.

Mina decides that she'd enjoy playing through a character arc with her PC Donna. Donna's trouble is *Who Needs Backup?* Discussing the potential arc with her gamemaster, Amanda, they decide that the false belief that Donna needs to be overcome is *I Can't Depend on Others*. They rewrite Donna's trouble as *Who Needs Backup? (I Can't Depend on Others)*. They decide that Donna needs to learn that *We Are Stronger Together as a Team*, and that this will be the new aspect that replaces her trouble when the character arc climaxes in the transformation phase.

As you'll recall, a trouble is simply an aspect that complicates a character's existence. Not every trouble is suited to tell a story about personal growth. Being Hunted by Black Nebula Mercenaries certainly complicates your life, but it's not an issue you can resolve by having a personal epiphany. If that's the case, you might want to consider if the character has another double-sided aspect that is better suited to be used in a character arc. If worst comes to worst, you can simply use a milestone to replace your trouble with something more suitable.

Subplot

A *subplot* is the heart of the character arc mechanic. As you're playing the game, the subplot is integrated into multiple scenes where the character's trouble, and the false belief that underlies it, are demonstrated and examined. Wrestling with the trouble increasingly comes to dominate the character's life.

Mechanically this happens by initiating the subplot in a scene, followed by three scenes where the subplot deepens. In the initiation scene, the character demonstrates how their false belief causes them to rely on their trouble. The player does this by invoking their trouble to gain an advantage.

To deepen the subplot, the trouble is compelled in three sepa-

rate scenes. Unlike a normal compel, the fate point that's normally given to the player is instead put aside to be rewarded during the transformation step. This is because the intent is to tell a story about a difficult journey toward personal growth. A trouble can only be deepened once in a given scene. Should it happen to be compelled again, treat the later compel as you would regularly, with the fate point being earned in the usual way.

Naturally both the gamemaster and the player will be more concerned than usual on how to come up with relevant compels for this particular trouble. In addition to showing how the trouble complicates the character's life or sets them up for failure, consider compelling the trouble to demonstrate how it (and the false belief that underlies it) makes them or people they care about unhappy. Show how they've been blind to the destruction and pain that follows in its wake.

Generally, you'll want to resolve the subplot over the course of a scenario. Don't feel that that once a character arc has begun that each consecutive scene needs to deepen the subplot. These can, and probably should, be spaced out a bit. If you attempt to complete an entire character arc in a single session, you run the risk of it feeling like a "very special" TV episode that's force-feeding a moral. On the other hand, if you take more than two or three sessions to resolve a character arc, you risk losing the narrative thread altogether. Pacing the scenes where the subplot is deepened is an exercise in taste. Also, bear in mind that this is a subplot. While the PC undergoing a character arc will be getting a bit more spotlight than usual, there will still be an overarching adventure that each player engages with.

While initiation and deepening are game mechanical elements that must happen during the subplot, it would be a shame to only focus on them. You are role players; you should create story and address themes with dialogue and action that have nothing to do with rules and dice rolling. A player with a character undergoing an arc should be showing the table through words and actions how they're wrestling with their false belief. They should be resisting change, but still be drawn to it. Other characters or NPCs (such as mentors or sidekicks) can offer advice, call the character out, or act as a foil by demonstrating a different attitude toward life. You might consider staging a flashback scene that shows how the character came to trapped in the false consciousness that

underlies their trouble.

Finally, it can very effective for the gamemaster to have an antagonist demonstrate the same trouble or false belief that the PC has. Typically, in fiction, such an antagonist isn't wrestling with the shadow consequences, instead they're doubling down, and causing more harm. While including such an antagonist isn't mandatory, they can make for a very satisfying opponent in the transformation scene.

Transformation

The time has come for the dramatic payoff, the *transformation*. Your character learns from their struggles and emerges as a better version of themselves.

After the player has completed the required elements of the subplot, they may transform the character. This involves replacing their trouble with the agreed upon new aspect that reflects how much they've grown. The player receives the three fate points they earned from three compels of their trouble, on top of any other Fate points they have already. In addition, in this scene, when you invoke either the new aspect or an aspect of an antagonist which is similar to your discarded trouble, the invocation is worth +3, as opposed to +2. This bonus only lasts for the current scene.

So, your character has changed for the better. There's still some role-playing you might do, such as having your character reach out and make amends to people they hurt before their transformation. Also, your character has probably had more than their fair share of the spotlight, so it would be cool to step back and let other characters be at the center of events for a bit.

And, of course, it's still important to foster drama and have aspects that can be compelled to earn you fate points. At upcoming milestones, carefully consider if you should hone your character's aspects to make them more double-sided. Perhaps you'd like to bring in a new trouble . . .

Competitions

Competitions are a way you can explore stories about events where people strive to demonstrate their skill by creating or doing something more impressive than anyone else. A competition differs from a contest in that the drama comes as much from trying to perform at the limits of your own ability as it does from overcoming rivals. You might strive to have the best costume and performance in a cosplay competition, or to bring the most impressive invention to a Maker Faire.

As a gamemaster, you'll want to think about the following elements:

- What skill governs the competition? Is it a futuristic version of DEF CON, where hackers will compete in cyberwarfare with the Intrusion skill? Or is it a gymnastic meet where you'll create routines with Acrobatics?
- Who is competing against the characters, what is their agenda, and how skilled are they? In a competition, you'll often allow the other players a chance to create advantages to support the player(s) competing, so you'll likely want to simply establish a skill rating for the competitors that's high enough to be challenging. It's better to set this level directly, rather than waste time rolling, by creating advantage skill actions for NPC supporters. Focus only on a few key competitors, don't waste time in detailing the capabilities of the entire field.
- What is the setting or arena where the competition will take place? Who are the judges? Who is in the audience? What is the prize for winning?

Describe the setting and what they should know about the NPCs to the players. Give them a chance to decide who will compete, and how other players will support them. The party may decide to learn more about the competitors or the judges. They may work to create advantages. For example, a character with a high Making skill might try to create a stunning laser light show to support someone in a dance contest.

When you are ready to get started, have the NPC competitors and the players choose a target level of difficulty that reflects the impressiveness of the performance they're all striving to achieve.

Next the competitors must roll their skill and overcome this difficulty, or they'll fail to capture the judges' attention and are out of the running. If they succeed, the measure of the success of their performance is the target number they were aiming for, not their skill roll. If they succeed with style, add +1 to the targeted level of difficulty.

Successful performances win more awards and recognition when they achieve higher levels of difficulty.

The competitor who has the highest successful level of difficulty is the overall winner of the competition. If there's a tie, you can either accept this as a valid result, hold a runoff between the tied competitors, or quickly decide the matter by seeing who's willing to bid the highest number of fate points (among the tied participants) to be the winner.

Downtime Tinkering

There are a number of things you can do between sessions to increase the enjoyment of your campaign, thus making the game richer for everyone.

It's invaluable to have a record of what went on in a session. Not only is it fun to look back and read about what's happened and see how the story has evolved, but having a record really helps the gamemaster build on what's occurred in the past to create new stories. The gamemaster is already responsible for preparation between games, so it makes sense for a player to pitch in and write a campaign log between sessions. Posting these session notes to a blog or a campaign wiki makes them easily available to everyone playing. If a player does this work, we recommend giving them an extra fate point to start the next session.

Similarly, some players draw well, or bake tasty treats. It's reasonable to give such players an extra fate point to start the session if they bring in a sketch of an NPC or another player's character, or if they supply the group with homemade cookies. I've seen people compose theme songs and even create a video title sequence with credits for the campaign. It goes without saying that you should also tell people that their creativity is awesome in addition to giving them fate points!

Beyond recognizing these creative activities, here are two other things players can do between sessions.

Cabin Aspect—players can write a description of what their cabin looks like, and what their characters do “off screen” between adventures. Share what you’ve written with the gamemaster, and if she approves, you can treat this description as a character aspect in scenes that occur on the party’s spaceship. You can invoke it, compel it, and use it to declare a narrative detail. This purpose of this portrayal is to show a slice of life. Tell us you have a pet hamster, or that you practice playing the oboe, or that you read romance novels. Avoid mentioning heroic equipment or special operations training. Your cabin aspect should never include secret labs, workout routines, or nuclear weapons. The rest of the game deals with how your characters are awesome, proactive protagonists. Your cabin aspect rounds this picture out.

Social Media Aspects—in a section on the Stellar Beacon zine, we mention that we tweet sci-fi news headlines from the game’s setting. You can find these tweets from the @ninja_festive account with the hashtag #SciFiNews. There are already hundreds of these news tweets. Gamemasters and players may share bulletins from their respective campaigns using the same hashtag. If a player likes or responds to such tweets in character (typically with an account they created for that purpose), that represents the character’s social media activity in the setting. Whenever they are participating in a scene in the Convention Authority, where they and NPCs they interact with have constant access to the holonet, you can treat this Twitter interaction as a character aspect. For example, the gamemaster could complicate a player’s life with a compel because they’re a total fanboy and are awkward around a favorite in-game celebrity. NPCs may be predisposed to trust or mistrust PCs based on their holonet activity.

We post new headlines nearly every day, so this can be an ongoing minigame between sessions.



The Fate Fractal and Starships

You can treat anything in the game world like it's a character. Anything can have aspects, skills, stunts, stress tracks, and even consequences if you need it to. This is called the fate fractal.

There are many things that can threaten a party: a natural disaster, a cunning trap, or a piece of high-tech automated security. So, what do you do when the PCs go up against something that isn't a character? It's simple, you treat that object or phenomenon as a character.



Is the hazard something that can harm a PC? Give it a skill and let it make attacks just as a normal opponent would.

Is this menace more of a distraction or an annoyance than a direct threat? Let it create aspects.

Does this danger have sensors it can use to discover a PC's aspects? Give it a skill for that.

You can also let the PCs use their skills against the threat just as they would with an opponent. An automated security system might be vulnerable to "attacks" from a PC's Intrusion skill, or a player might escape a trap by winning an Acrobatics contest. If it makes sense for the hazard in question to take a good deal of

effort to surpass, give it a stress track and let it take a mild consequence or two. In other words, do what makes narrative sense—if a fire is too big for a PC to put out, the scene should focus on avoidance or escape, and work like a challenge.

The fate fractal is an insanely useful, powerful tool. And like nearly everything in the game, it's a tool for storytelling, not simulating stuff. Do not make something a character merely because you can, only do so when it achieves a narrative end.

Starships, Mecha, and Vehicles

Spacecraft and other vehicles can be represented with aspects, stress, consequences, and stunts. Typically, players will use their own skills to operate the craft: flying it using their Piloting skill, firing the ship's weapons using Blast, operating its sensors using Scan, and so on. You can see examples of this in the introductory adventure *Bringing Fire* included in these rules.

Combat between starships is generally handled using the conflict rules. If a spaceship piloted by a player character concedes or is taken out, the result should be significant in the story: it's forced to crash land, it's tractored and captured by space mercenaries, etc. Do not blow up the vessel and destroy the entire party. Of course, NPCs' ships can explode in a million pieces of glowing light. Use good judgement, and act like a screenwriter or director for a space saga.

Starship conflict happens occasionally. Most of the time, however, player characters will simply be travelling around the galaxy in the party's vessel. You won't need to consider the ship as a full character, it will mostly be used for scenery and setting—much like the *Galactica*, the *Enterprise*, the *Serenity*. By and large, you can think of starships as hooks that carry aspects which get the party into and out of trouble, and which support whatever themes you want to explore in your play. It's often useful to think of the ship's aspects and consequences as scene aspects that travel with the party.

In role-playing games, starship battles probably should occur less frequently than they do in films or other media. This is because such fights typically aren't conflicts where every player can contribute equally. Space battles are to pilots what embassy parties

are to people with apex Networking skills, something that comes up occasionally so that they can be in the spotlight.

If you really want your space combat to be more like a traditional wargame, the *Fate Space Toolkit* from Evil Hat Productions has seventeen pages of rules that you can pick and choose from to consider weapons ranges and ordinance movement, mapping combat, and so on. Incorporate the guidelines that you and your group find fun, but keep in mind that getting too far into wargaming details will compromise the melodramatic, character-focused nature of *Return to the Stars*.



Props

Return to the Stars is a game about people who are not defined by the stuff they carry. Still, loot makes players happy. Props are gear that you can have fun collecting, but which are only used a single time for a dramatic effect. Like an intriguing prop in a well-made science fiction movie, it provides a moment of cool that shakes things up and advances the story, and then you don't see it again.

Props can only be used once and then discarded afterwards. However, if a GM has an antagonistic NPC use a prop, it should still be available for players to loot if they defeat this foe—turning a resource against the antagonists is a staple of space opera tales.

Props are found during adventures, they are never purchased. The Convention Authority is a postcapitalist, postscarcity setting, after all. A PC can keep as many props as they have refreshes—if they exceed that limit, they can give a surplus prop to another player or discard it.

Players always know what the props they've acquired do. Most props come with FAQs, or sometimes the characters just figure it out. Struggling to identify what your cool new toy does isn't fun, so we don't waste any time on such tasks.

Props often work in a manner similar to stunts, but will often have a more dramatic effect. If a prop seems really in character for a PC, you might decide to make it a more permanent part of the game by converting it into a stunt. But this may require that both player and GM have a conversation about potentially reworking the text to bring the power in-line with other stunts. Alternatively, you could consider translating the prop into an aspect.

Here are some props you can add to the game:

Aid Pack—as an action, apply the Aid Pack to a character. After use, any consequences they've suffered are considered treated, and they have begun the recovery process.

Arc-Light Spandex—when you have a success with style in a competition with Cosplay skills, add an additional +1 to your achieved target.

Biofeedback Patch—increase your Self-Control skill by +1 point for the remainder of the scene.

Black Ice—when you achieve a success with style by using Scan to

detect someone using Intrusion to break into a computer system, you may inflict a moderate consequence on them.

Chaos Sapphires—gain +1 to both Cosplay and Social Influence for the remainder of the scene when you wear these ephemeral gems.

Cos-Med-Kit—use this as a free action in combat to clear all stress, remove a minor consequence, and reapply your makeup.

Cryoblocker—discard this prop as a free action to prevent an opponent from taking an action in this exchange during a conflict.

Cunning Plan Journal—you may use Scholarship to determine your initiative in one combat scene. You get +2 to your first roll in that scene.

Distract-O-Bot—this prop allows you to automatically succeed in an attempt to evade an enemy.

Drop Tank Afterburner—you may immediately reattempt a failed Piloting skill check.

ECCM (Electronic counter-countermeasure) Missile—when you use this, your success with style using a Blast attack in space combat doesn't cause damage; however, all your enemies' defense rolls will be a -2 for the rest of the combat.

Endocrine on a Stick—when you tie attempting to create an advantage with Cosplay, convert it to a success with style.

Escape Pod—convert being taken out in space combat to a concession.

Fresh Paint—when you succeed with style in a competition with Making, add a +1 to your achieved target.

Haptic Hold Out Blade—you deal an extra point of stress when attacking with Combat Arts for the remainder of the scene.



Holo Double—when you succeed with style using Acrobatics to dodge an attack, you may redirect that attack against any other opponent of your choice.

Human Goop Hormone—increase your Might skill by +2 points for the remainder of the scene, and take a minor consequence.

Minimines—If you succeed with style in creating an advantage with Blast, you may deploy these Minimines instead of using a normal attack. The Minimines immediately cause two shifts of damage to all your opponents in the scene.

Mnemonic Markup Machine—get +2 to efforts to create an advantage with Scholarship. If you succeed with style, you can create two aspects that each have two invocations.

Monofilament Blood Blade—when you succeed in defending with Combat Arts, you may take a minor consequence to force your opponent to take a moderate consequence. If your foe can't take a moderate consequence, they must take a severe consequence or be taken out.

Neo-Tape—get +3 to a single attempt to repair something with Making.

Old Earth Optics—discard this prop immediately in order to achieve a normal success with any Scan roll.

Oxytocin Chewing Gum—receive +2 to all Empathy rolls for the remainder of the scene. Also, enjoy a refreshing, minty taste.

Personality Prosthetic—use this to create a new character aspect based on a fake implanted motivation or memory. This aspect will last for the remainder of the scene.

Pom-Poms—discard this prop to turn a failure in creating an advantage with Acrobatics into a normal success.

Quadcorder—when you succeed with style in creating an advantage using Scan to solve a problem, you may immediately use Scan at +2 instead of Science to overcome the difficulty.

Rocket Assist Sneakers—for one scene you may use Making in the place of Acrobatics.

Self-Destruct Sequencer—use this prop when you are going to concede a conflict. The Self-Destruct Sequencer forces your opponent to take a major consequence. Discard this prop after use.

Selfie Drones—deploy these drones to get +1 to all social Networking skill rolls for the remainder of the scene.

Semiotic Symbiote—implant this creature to increase Scholarship

by +2 for the remainder of the round. Take a minor consequence when you vomit it up at the end of the scene.

Shockwave in a Satchel—expending this device creates a sonic blast that removes all scene aspects currently being used. At the GM's discretion, an aspect may stay in play if it can't logically be removed, but all free invocations of it are stripped. Add the new scene aspect "Ringing in the Ears" with one free invocation for the player who used the satchel.

Surreal Filter—when you tie attempting to create an advantage with Science, you get a free invocation on the aspect you created.

Swiss Army Tube—automatically achieve a success with style in any single Survival skill roll.

Tracer Rounds—for the remainder of combat, you get a free invocation when you tie creating an advantage with Blast.

Wuff-Chit—get +3 to a single attempt to create an advantage with Social Influence.



Chapter Five: The Setting



The Revealed Galaxy

As players and gamemasters, we need a common understanding to create stories together. But sometimes it's hard to get started with a science fiction RPG because there's so much worldbuilding that it can seem that you're expected to absorb what seems like hundreds of pages of backstory before you can even begin playing. *Return to the Stars* tries to strike a balance by giving you key information about the setting combined with some of the thinking that went into the worldbuilding to help you make decisions about what you might add to the setting.

In a typical *Return to the Stars* adventure, the party goes to a world that's been isolated for a long time and discovers marvels and adventures. This means that you needn't focus on an intricate set of existing historical and political relationships of that world and the rest of the galaxy, and that any arbitrary set of societal arrangements and technology can exist in that solar system.

Unlike many other science fiction games, there's no intelligent alien life. Not only is this a very reasonable extrapolation from the Drake equation, it also keeps the focus on telling stories about human beings. And, of course, if you want to explore radical differences, you can always create stories about people who have so thoroughly reengineered or augmented themselves that they're essentially unrecognizable as human beings.

If this overview leaves you hungry for more background, we tweet daily "news headlines" from the setting of the game on Twitter at [@ninja_festive](https://twitter.com/ninja_festive). We've been doing this since 2017, so there are hundreds of ideas and story prompts available already.

Technology

In broad terms, the Convention Authority has the highest level of technology in Revealed Space, although some other societies are more advanced in areas that they care about and have concentrated on. For example, the people of Third York are noted as having advanced cyborg modifications and very sophisticated robots.

Technology that is common in the Convention Authority:

- Terraforming.
- Personal genetic engineering and self-modification as a hobby.
- Age and youth extension.
- Total control of one's fertility and gender from an early age.

- Artificial gravity.
- AI with roughly human-level intelligence, but specialized skills and abilities (again, the intention is to keep the focus on human beings).
- Cold sleep—suspended animation typically for people suffering from an untreatable illness, it was previously used in some early attempts at interstellar travel.
- Deflector fields and shields for spaceships and other structures (but not personal shields).
- Scanning technology that can detect interesting things, but which is most useful from orbital range or closer; meaning that player characters need to travel toward the danger in order to investigate.
- Various blasters, plasma weapons, lasers, disruptors, flame guns, etc. We care that there are things that go *Zap!* and don't care to make up a bunch of simulative crunches differentiating types of weapons.
- Experimental prosthetics that function in hyperspace. (As noted below, digital technology doesn't function in hyperspace, but the importance of disabled representation means that we want people to be able to have awesome cybernetic prosthetics, driven by intricately engineered analog computers. Such prototypes can't act as a general computing device, or provide archived information.)
- The holonet—a multisensory virtual and augmented reality network that also serves as a social network and a storehouse of human knowledge. Even when you aren't present, bots can act on your behalf. Most advanced worlds have a form of holonet based on common protocols from before the Great Silence.

Technology that is not available in the setting:

- Time travel doesn't exist in part because it's boring, plot destroying, and filled with unmanageable paradoxes.
- Communication is limited to the speed of space travel. The players need to act on their own initiative, they can't phone home for instructions.
- Beaming or teleporting, which simplifies interesting challenges out of existence, and removes opportunities for pilots to shine.
- There's no telepathy or other psychic powers.
- Travel in hyperspace is impossible for digital computers. Play

revolves around characters knowing things and possessing a can-do attitude thanks to their experiences and skills. This game isn't about looking things up. Spaceships are flown by sophisticated analog controls. Note: this also means that play moves from places where the holonet is ubiquitous to places without digital distractions, allowing you to tell a variety of stories.

- Generally, there are no vastly superior AI intellects, although the restrictions on travel through hyperspace means that you can tell stories about such entities on particular planets without worrying about them affecting the rest of the setting.

- There's been no singularity. Artificial intelligence has always plateaued and reached a point where it could no longer constantly improve itself. A few fringe philosophers and religious cults still believe that this may be possible someday, though.

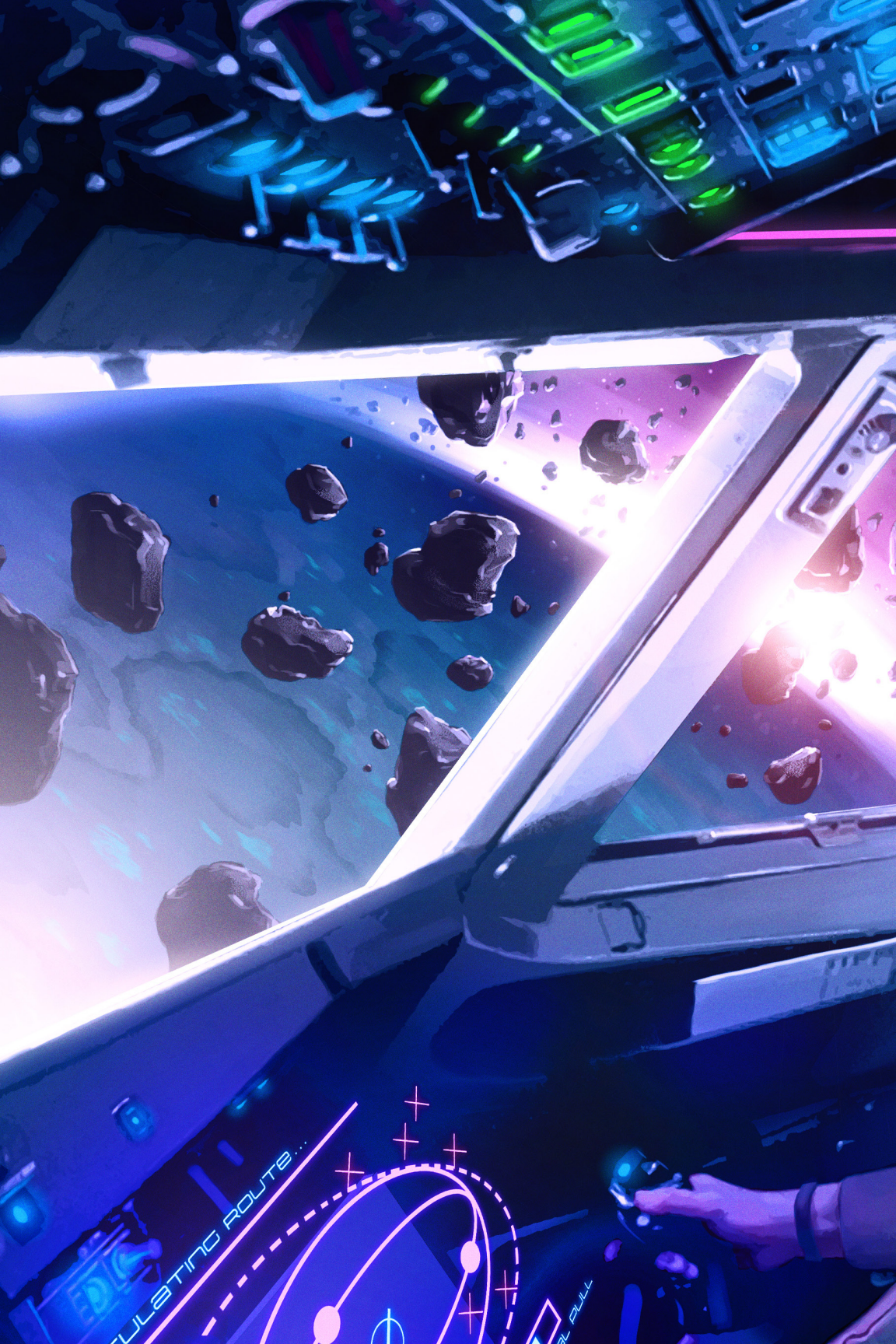
Travel

Warning, spoilers for the introductory scenario.

Return to the Stars is set in the early 27th century, 600 years from now. During that time, humanity spread throughout the galaxy thanks to origami drives which fold hyperspace. It was 125 years ago, when the great Stellar Beacon at Mars, which illuminated hyperspace, suddenly went silent, rendering galactic travel impossible. This is known as the Great Silence. Recently, partial illumination of approximately five percent of settled space allowed for origami travel in a region of space which is now referred to as the Revealed Galaxy.

The new Stellar Beacon signals once a week; origami travel is only possible at that time. When the players travel somewhere, they can't immediately leave. The complicated nature of hyperspace topology means that some destinations may occasionally be inaccessible during certain times, such as when it suits the needs of the plot. The nature of origami technology means there's no tiresome need for interstellar maps in the game.

In the game's setting, most planets are either newly rediscovered or still isolated. A few small interstellar communities are using primitive, low-range 22nd-century stardrive technology, rather than origami engines. At the present moment, only the Convention Authority can create new origami engines, although other civilizations and individuals may have access to ships which were built before the Great Silence.





The Convention Authority

Before the loss of the Mars Beacon—which ended galaxy-spanning travel for over a century—the Convention Authority was an association of societies that celebrated and preserved the speculative popular culture of the 20th and 21st centuries, including fantasy, science fiction, and gaming. It was an important tourist destination, and boasted many of the galaxy’s most skilled terraforming engineers. During the Great Silence, the systems of the Convention remained connected, due in part to a large and varied fleet of replica early interstellar crafts.

Why play as members of this civilization? What does it do for you as a gamer?

First, it gives you a rationale for bringing in all the fun elements you like from all sorts of different types of pop culture, and mashing them up together. For example, the initial playtest group’s characters combined things they loved from Tolkien, RPGs, My Little Pony, and the *Girl Genius* comics. This mashup was possible because they came from a civilization that valued these stories, and had “sufficiently advanced” 27th-century cosplay technology.

Of course, you don’t have to take advantage of this—if you want to play as a scientist or a hotshot pilot who doesn’t celebrate “ancient entertainment,” that’s fine too.

Second, as a thriving post-scarcity civilization, it reinforces optimism about the future: a core theme of the game. It gives players a secure base from which they can go “out there” and have escapades reconnecting the lost worlds of humanity. Later, when characters return, players can reflect on what they’ve experienced in a setting of safety and abundance. So, your game can include both danger on the frontier, and also pastoral cozy futurism in the style of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* while set in the Convention Authority.

And, of course, such a society is perfect for exploring and interrogating different elements of our pop culture.

A note on naming: while the full and proper name of the civilization is the Convention Authority, in common usage it is called the Convention or abbreviated as CA. Outsiders sometimes disparagingly refer to it as the Authority. A common internal nickname is the Pop-Culture, less frequently it’s referred to as the Feds.

Cosmopolitanism

The Convention generally, and the Recontact Initiative specifically, see themselves as cosmopolitans, and Diogenes's formulation is apt: they are citizens (πολίτης) of the cosmos (κόσμος) with obligations broader than their family, culture, or world.

They believe that there's great value in a variety of cultures existing, because there are so many different possibilities for humans to thrive. At the same time, they understand that there are universal human rights, and everyone has an obligation to see that these rights are upheld and that human dignity is respected. Such ideals can clash, and players may need to make judgement calls. There is no "prime directive" to putatively simplify their decisions or act as a cheap source of drama.

One thing is clear, the Convention has no ideological agenda to remake the universe in their own image—they're simply uninterested in converting other civilizations into hypercreative pop culture enthusiasts. And, as a post-scarcity society, they don't **need** anything from anyone else. They're already living in a hedonistic utopia.

At the same time, they are definitely interested in traveling to learn from the stories of others. Like the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, they recognize that, "All cultural practices and objects are mobile; they like to spread, and almost all are creations of intermixture."

The words of the Roman dramatist Terence are a fair expression of their values, "I am human, nothing human is alien to me."

Governance

The Convention is mostly a loose form of anarchy, with a vestigial form of representative democracy checked by direct plebiscite. Titles of officials, dignitaries, and what few governmental organizations exist are often derived from the nomenclature of late 20th- and early 21st-century science fiction conventions—there are con chairs, incident response teams, and guests of honor. All the needs and (almost) all the desires a person can imagine are freely available in the physical world or the hyperreality of the holonet.

At the same time, there are large projects that require human coordination or access to resources that would strain even the nearly unfathomable resources of a post-scarcity society. These are managed by voluntary associations. Some of the most noteworthy are listed below.

- **The Recontact Initiative**—this association is responsible for building the fleet needed to reconnect the lost worlds of humanity, documenting what's been learned, and alerting the Convention to any threats uncovered.

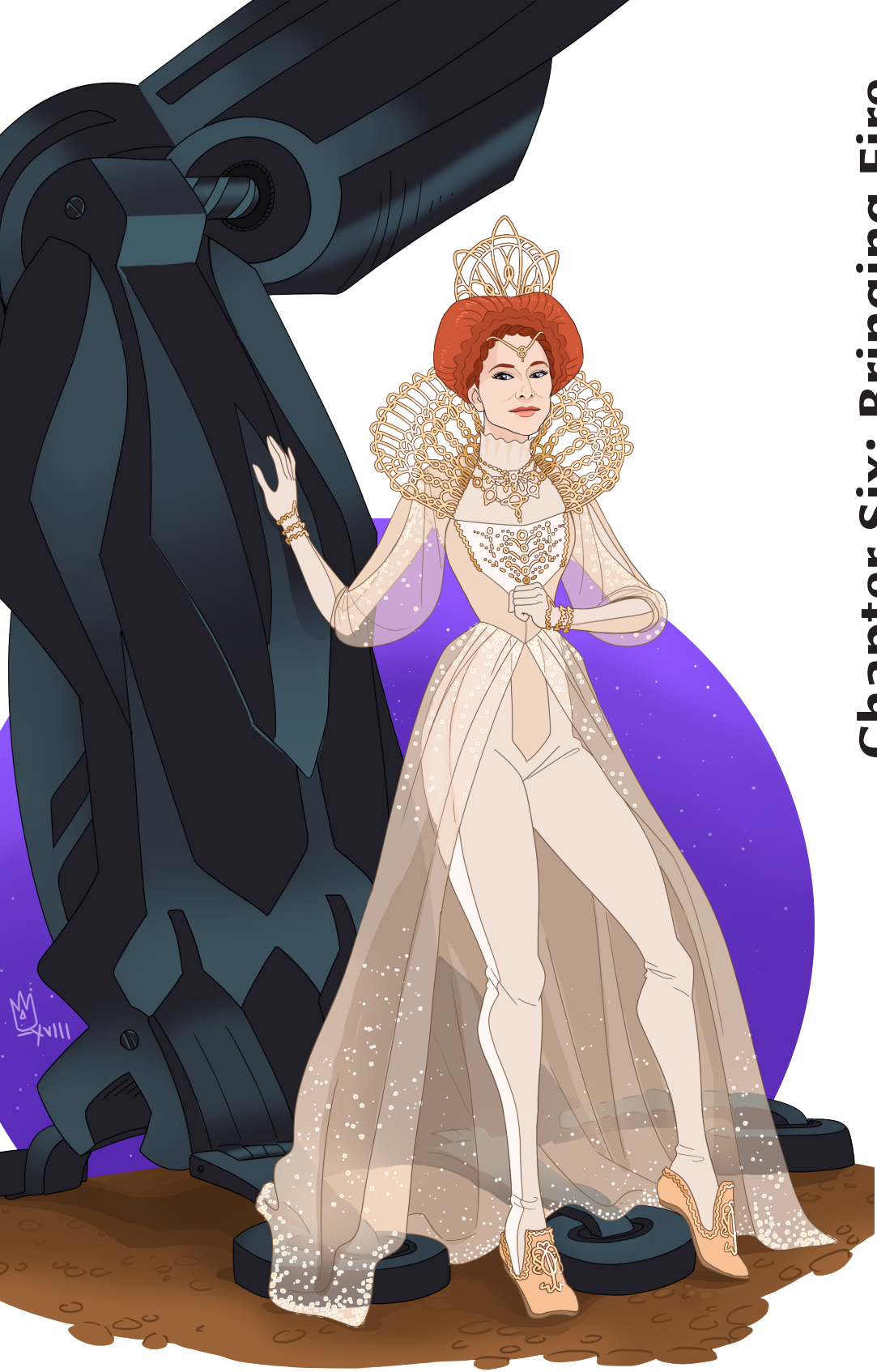
- **Conflict Simulation Society**—this organization maintained the replica fleet of early interstellar vessels that sustained the Convention as a small-scale interstellar society during the Great Silence. They're now building warships to defend against Galtean pirates. They also run some of the most amazing LARPs in the galaxy.

- **Science Council**—as this organization well knows, science advances thanks to rigorous peer review and collegial brainstorming. The Science Council provides both of these. Scientists of many different disciplines are very eager to travel the stars to test hypotheses that were unprovable during the Great Silence. And, of course, reconnecting with isolated civilizations is an unparalleled opportunity for the social sciences.

- **Eumenides**—the “all-seeing kindly ones” act in covert ways in other cultures, either to protect the Convention or to gather information that's hard to acquire overtly.

- **The Scouts Academy**—this academy trains people in survival techniques and in hitherto hypothetical first contact techniques.

Chapter Six: Bringing Fire



This scenario is designed to introduce both the setting and the rules of Return to the Stars by telling a thrilling yarn that puts the player characters at the center of events as a new era dawns on the galaxy.

It is broken down into five scenes; for each we provide details about the setting, challenges, descriptions of people involved, and advice for running the scene. Of course, the fun of a narrative roleplaying game is telling the story together, so be prepared to improvise and build on what the players bring to the story. By reading through the entire scenario, and being familiar with its arc, you can guide their contributions to advance the story.

There are optional musical cues listed that you might play between scenes to set the mood while people are grabbing food, stretching, or hitting the washroom. Or you can listen to them on your own before the game as “thematic preparation.”

Setup

Before beginning the scenes, either have the players create their characters or hand out the four pre-generated characters, and let the players choose who they want to play.

Even if everyone has read the rules, it is a good idea to go through the character sheet section by section, so everyone is on the same page.

Place the game aspects (Hopepunk and Cosmopolitanism) on the table.

Then have each player introduce their character.

ASPECTS

High concept: **Straight Shooting Scientist**

- Trouble: Wait, that looks interesting...
- Aspect: Science Advances One Funeral at a Time
- Aspect: Mistakes Lead to Success
- Aspect: My Destiny is in the Stars!

SKILLS

- +4 Science
- +3 Blast, Acrobatics
- +2 Cosplay, Networking, Empathy
- +1 Making, Scan, Survival, Piloting

Task resolution summary

Roll 4 Fate dice and add your skill rating. For every point you exceed the opposition you gain a shift.

Opposition is either active (another character rolls against you) or passive (a target number set by the gamemaster)

There are 4 outcomes:

- Fail: You don't succeed, or do so at a major cost
- Tie (0 shifts): succeed at a minor cost
- Succeed (1-2 shifts): succeed at no cost
- Succeed with style (3+ shifts) success with an additional benefit

STUNT **Polymath:** your science skills applies equally to every domain of science

That's Funny: once per session you can succeed at any Scan roll, create an aspect to describe the scientific anomaly that drew your attention

Plasma Weapons are Messy: After you successfully shoot a target, they gain the aspect "on fire"

Tanya Parks, PhD



Stress

1 — 2 — 3 —

Consequences

1 — 2 — 3 —

2 Mild —

4 Moderate —

6 Severe —

Tanya Parks is straight shooting science officer and a polymath, who the team can rely on in investigations in diverse fields from astrophysics to forensic pathology.

She's also skilled with heavy plasma weapons: her motto: "Science advances one funeral at a time."

Her inanimate curiosity means she can sometimes be distracted by interesting scientific anomalies.



High concept: **pilot who breaks all the rules**

Trouble: Who needs backup?

Aspect: need for speed

Aspect: button masher

Aspect: What can I say, the AI likes me?

ASPECTS

SKILLS

- +4 Piloting
- +3 Acrobatics, Scan
- +2 Blast, Intrusion, Making
- +1 Cosplay, Might, Empathy, Networking

Task resolution summary

Roll 4 Fate dice and add your skill rating. For every point you exceed the opposition you gain a shift.

Opposition is either active (another character rolls against you) or passive (a target number set by the gamemaster)

There are 4 outcomes:

- Fail: You don't succeed, or do so at a major cost
- Tie (0 shifts): succeed at a minor cost
- Succeed (1-2 shifts): succeed at no cost
- Succeed with style (3+ shifts) success with an additional benefit

Trick Maneuver: when you succeed in evading damage using piloting, you opponent takes one stress, or two if you succeed with style.

Pecking, Ordered: In an unfamiliar social setting, you can immediately understand the power structures involved.

DPS: you can choose to be at +2 to your melee attacks at the cost of you opponents inflicting +2 damage if they succeed in hitting you.

Belladonna Rose
Esther Dahlia
Ferencider (Donna)



Stress
1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____ 1 ____
Consequences

2 Mild ____
4 Moderate ____

6 Severe ____

Belladonna Rose Esther Dahlia Ferencider (her friends call her Donna) grew up in a "traditionalist" agricultural commune. Well, traditionalist except that everyone had been genetically engineered to look like halflings, dwarves, and gnomes of fantasy fiction. She hated her rural life, and feels the space exploration will feed her wanderlust and take her far for away from the farm.

Because of her appearance she sometimes has a hard time being taken seriously. She compensates by wearing nearly constantly wearing a flight jacket with emblazoned with patches from all her missions.

ASPECTS

High concept: **morphing first contact lead**
Trouble: too popular for my own good
Aspect: historian specializing in pre-stellar Earth
Aspect: ambitious and hardworking
Aspect: famous cosplay champion

SKILLS

- +4 Cosplay
- +3 Networking, Scholarship
- +2 Empathy, Acrobatics, Combar Arts
- +1 Intrusion, Scan, Making, Blast

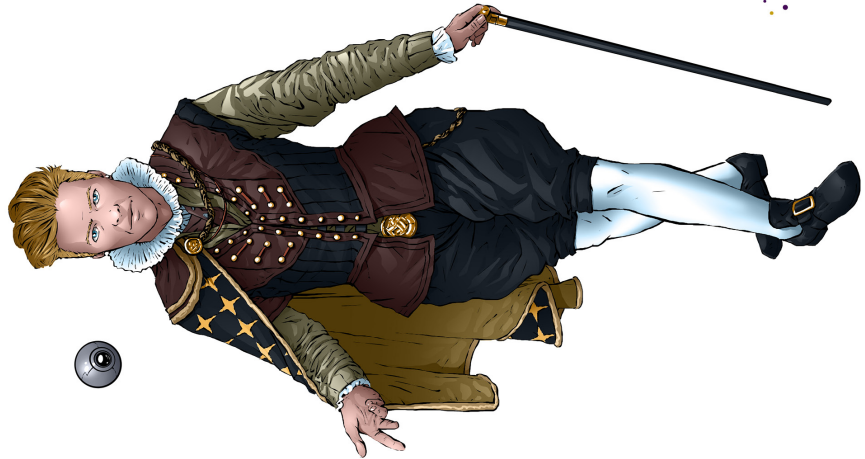
Task resolution summary

Roll 4 Fate dice and add your skill rating. For every point you exceed the opposition you gain a shift.

Opposition is either active (another character rolls against you) or passive (a target number set by the gamemaster)

There are 4 outcomes:

- Fail: You don't succeed, or do so at a major cost
- Tie (0 shifts): succeed at a minor cost
- Succeed (1-2 shifts): succeed at no cost
- Succeed with style (3+ shifts) success with an additional benefit



Leslie Lechance

Stress
1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____

Consequences

0 ____

1 ____

2 Mild ____

3 ____

4 Moderate ____

5 ____

6 Severe ____

Leslie Lachance is a shape shifting gender fluid first contact specialist.

(current pronoun: he)

A historian of old earth and famous cosplay champion, he uses both these skill sets to help the team interact with the new societies they discover.

Charismatic. He is, perhaps, a bit too popular and ambitious.



ASPECTS
 High concept: **Starship Engineer with a Big Wrench**
 Trouble: I protect the week
 Aspect: Wait, I have another idea...
 Aspect: Zero-gravity water polo champion
 Aspect: A girl in every starport.

SKILLS
 +4 Making
 +3 Survival, Combat Arts
 +2 Blast, Acrobatics, Scanning
 +1 Cosplay, Might, Self-Control, Intrusion
Task resolution summary

Roll 4 Fate dice and add your skill rating. For every point you exceed the opposition you gain a shift.

Opposition is either active (another character rolls against you) or passive (a target number set by the gamemaster)

There are 4 outcomes:

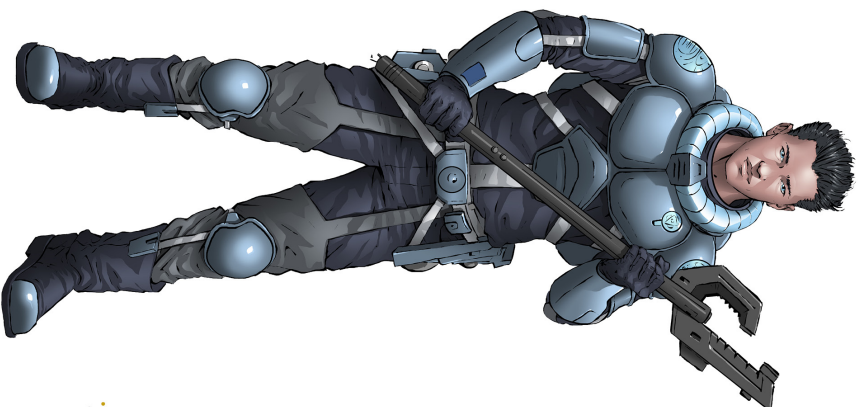
- Fail: You don't succeed, or do so at a major cost
- Tie (0 shifts): succeed at a minor cost
- Succeed (1 -2 shifts): succeed at no cost
- Succeed with style (3+ shifts) success with an additional benefit

STUNTS
 The **Great Outdoors** once per session, you may reduce a moderate consequence to a minor one, by luxuriating in the great outdoors.

Not OSHA Compliant +2 to attacks you make in fights that take place in engineering related settings: workshops, factories, etc. Create an aspect to note the dangerous element of the setting giving you this edge.

Training montage once per session you can prepare for your next combat, gaining +1 to all Combat Arts skill checks in that scene

Camel Bolívar Elneccash



Stress
 1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____ 1 ____
Consequences
 0 2 Mild ____
 4 Moderate ____

6 Severe ____

Gamil Bolívar, starship engineer, is often seen carrying with a big wrench that he uses both to fix things and also to protect the week.

He's rather athletic, both enjoying the great outdoors and as the captain of a zero gravity water polo team.

Good looking, he has a girl in every starport.

Class Acts (Scene One)

Scene summary: The party encounter “friendly” rivals in a competition to earn a place on the crew of a new star ship while attending a history symposium on the Climate Wars of the 21st Century.

GM objectives in this scene: to provide some background about the setting of the game, orient the players about what they can expect to be doing next, and to introduce the friendly rivals who are the first antagonists they’ll face.

Optional musical cue: “Space Game” by MC Lars

Dramatis personæ:

Elizabeth Regina is the competent and popular leader of skilled team competing against the party. In this scenario, she’ll be accompanied by Gwyneth and as many other NPCs as needed to match the number of characters in the party.

Elizabeth Regina III

High Concept: Overachieving Queen Bee

Trouble: Wants to Win Big

Aspect: Gen’gineered Recreation of Queen Elizabeth I of England

Aspect: A Horde of Online Followers

Aspect: Politics Is the Art of the Possible

Skills: Networking 5, Piloting 4, Self-Control 4, Blast 3, Empathy 3

Scholarship 2, Acrobatics 2, and Scan 2

Gwyneth

High Concept: Hulking Warrior with a Heart of Gold

Trouble: Clumsy

Aspect: Fearless

Skills: Blast 4, Might 3, Scan 3, Combat Arts 2, and Acrobatics 2

Xug Xu

High Concept: Orc Engineer

Trouble: Being Green: Not Easy

Aspect: Target Lock Acquired!

Skills: Scan 4, Making 3, and Cosplay 3

Hakeem Edo

High Concept: Scheming Lieutenant of an Alpha Leader

Trouble: Fifth Wheel

Aspect: Flyguy

Skills: Pilot 4, Survival 3, Intrusion 3, and Scan 1

Getting Started

Read or ad lib this introduction:

With the development of spaceships with origami engines that could fold hyperspace, humanity scattered into like-minded communities across the galaxy—including your home: the Convention Authority, which was founded to celebrate the now-classical arts of science fiction, fantasy, gaming, and geek culture. However, 120 years ago, the hyperspace beacon went silent, making galactic travel impossible.

Because the Convention Authority had a replica fleet that celebrated early interstellar craft (which predated the development of origami engines), your local systems have been able to maintain a small interstellar civilization. However, you don't know what has happened in the rest of the galaxy.

Being a civilization of scientists, makers, and sci-fi enthusiasts, the Convention Authority has been working to build longer range star crafts to reconnect with the lost worlds of humanity. The first such ship, the CSS Jules Verne is nearing completion.

The best of the brightest from across the Authority have enrolled in the newly formed Scouts Academy for training, and are competing in small teams to become part of the crew of the Verne. You are all members of one such team, facing a series of challenges in a contest to join the crew of the Verne. You are trying to impress not only your instructors, but also people across the Convention Authority, who are following this friendly competition with great interest.

Your agenda for the day:

- *First, you'll be attending a history symposium on the Climate Wars of the 21st century.*
- *Next, you'll be competing against another team in a (nonlethal) mecha battle in the evocatively named Deathtrap Arena.*
- *Finally, you'll compete against a number of teams in a scavenger hunt across the entire planet!*

You've just arrived, early, at the lecture hall where the history symposium will be held.

Place two index cards that show the scene aspects:

- **Futuristic High-Tech Lecture Hall**
- **Holographic Social Network Eagerly Observing the Contestants**

Remember to start the scene by setting your GM fate points to be equal to the number of players.

Other scout cadets arrive and get settled in. Then the party's opponents for the mecha combat later in day present themselves.

Elizabeth Regina makes an entrance with her posse. Let the players know that she leads one of the most successful and popular teams competing against them—in fact, the simple act of her entering the room has caused a stir on their social media accounts—triggering notifications and haptic alerts buzzing in from the AI autonomous agents monitoring their holonet profiles. Everyone knows that she is a genetically engineered recreation of Queen Elizabeth I, and that she has a huge following on social media. She overshadows her teammates. Describe Gwyneth as a large, awkward-looking young woman.

If they are being played, you can describe Xug Xu as a small man in a flight suit cosplaying as a green orc, and Hakeem Edo as a lithe and graceful black man.

Elizabeth haughtily advances to a seat near the front, and waves her hands, re-arranging the three holographic selfie drones that swirl over her head.

Gwyneth follows, and knocks something off the desk of one of the player characters. Give the players a moment to react, then have Gwyneth stammer out an apology. Hearing this, Elizabeth reacts sharply, saying, “Hufflepuffs are Beneath Notice” attempting to create an aspect of that name on the party with her networking skill of five. The players can see that the cutting remark was captured on the selfie drones. The players can oppose this, or attempt to take some counter action, but before this goes on too long, the instructor arrives and begins the symposium.

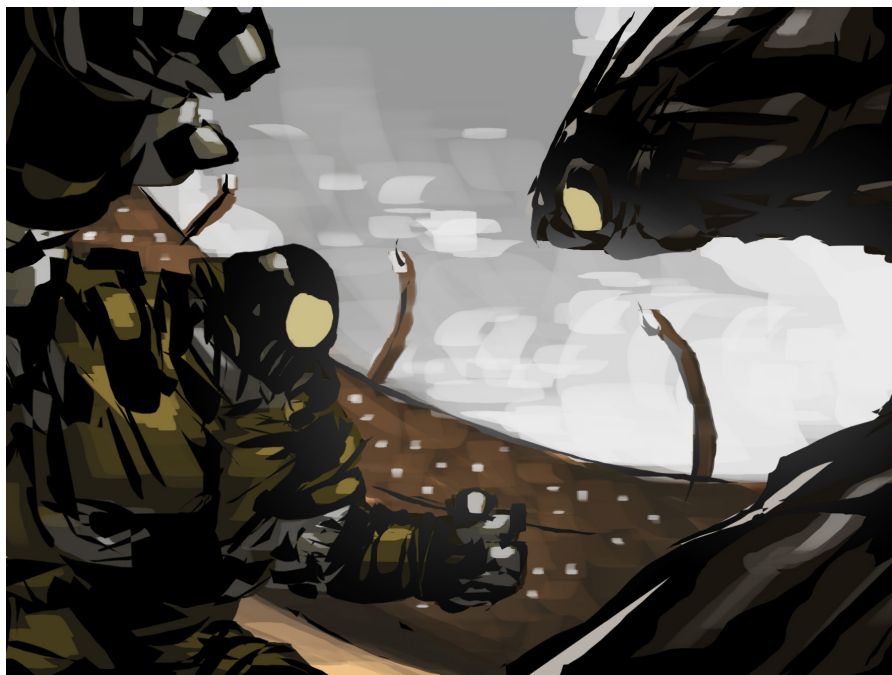
The instructor starts by asking when the Climate Wars of the 21st century began. This a chance for one of the player characters to state a thesis reflecting their theory. If no one jumps at the opportunity, prompt them. There is no wrong or right answer, this a chance for you to highlight that this is a game where players are encouraged to “make stuff up” about the world. Have one of them make a skill roll on Scholarship to provide evidence for their hypothesis, possibly backed by other players joining in, or creating supporting aspects.

Ask if anyone else has a theory. Perhaps another player will respond. Elizabeth Regina will chime in after everyone is done. Depending on what the player characters have said already, she'll chime in with something like, "The most commonly accepted date is the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011." or "Some historians date the origins of the Climate Wars to the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century." She'll make a roll on her Scholarship skill of 2, backed by spending a fate point on her aspect "Wants to Win Big."

At this point, have the instructor wrap up the scene by announcing who has made the strongest case (based on comparing the skill totals).

She'll thank everyone for their participation and announce that next time they'll have two special guests who can give firsthand accounts of the early 21st century: the early transhumanist, Ray Kurzweil, and an AI created out the most documented living being of that time—Kim Kardashian.

She then wishes both Elizabeth Regina and the party good luck in the mecha battle in Deathtrap Arena . . .



Trap Tropes (Scene Two)

Scene summary: The party battles Elizabeth Regina's posse in a mecha battle, becoming irradiated in the process.

GM objectives in this scene: to give the players experience in using the conflict rules in a nonlethal environment.

Optional musical cue: "Sports Go Sports" by Garfunkel and Oates

Dramatis personæ:

Elizabeth Regina and her squad, see above.

The mecha they are manning:

Mecha "Cyclops"

Aspect: Military Grade!?!

Stunt: **Death Ray** once per scene whenever you attack another mecha—whether or not you deal damage—that mecha and its crew gain the aspect "Irradiated," and you gain one free tap on it.

Stress 1, 2

Consequence 4, 6, 8

Scene Aspect: Deathtrap Arena

Either side can tap this aspect. The GM should describe how the ridiculous comic book-style traps scattered throughout the arena impact the conflict. Have fun with giant spikes, pendulums of doom, giant glass spheres filled with acid, electrified streams of lava . . .

Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points to equal the number of players.

Read or ad lib this introduction:

You make your way to Deathtrap Arena, a grandiose structure where gladiatorial teams crew giant mechas to fight for glory. The name "Deathtrap" is a bit of hyperbole, as the goal is to disable the opponents' mecha. Injuries are rare, but not unheard of.

Descending beneath the stadium, you arrive at the staging area where you'll have some time to prepare your mecha for combat.



Give the party the handout for their mecha:

Mecha “Monkey Business”

Aspect: “Power Blast”

Stress 2, 4

Consequence 2, 4, 6

This mecha is modelled on a baby gorilla, with a midnight-blue chassis. The crew compartment is in the chest, and laser cannons are built into each arm.

Let them know that they’ll be running the mecha together as a character in the combat. One player will be assigned as pilot, and the mecha will defend against attacks with that character’s Piloting skill. Another player will take the gunner’s position, attacking with the mecha’s laser arms using the Blast skill. The other players can create advantages using skills such as Scan or Making.

Ask the players if there is anything they wish to do to prepare. They may improvise in a bunch of different directions: you may see them use their skills to create advantageous improvements on their mecha, position their team on social media, or perhaps they’ll try and hack their way into seeing what sort of mecha their opponent is using.

After this short prep, the party is ushered into their mecha, which rises on a platform to the center of Deathtrap Arena. In front of them, a portcullis is raised and Cyclops strides into the arena. The crowd roars and social feeds explode as spectators react to the gargantuan size of the mecha. Point out to the players the “Military Grade!?” aspect of their opponent—the realization that Elizabeth Regina has somehow manipulated things or pulled strings to get an actual weapon of war installed in her mecha will likely rally the party in outrage against her.

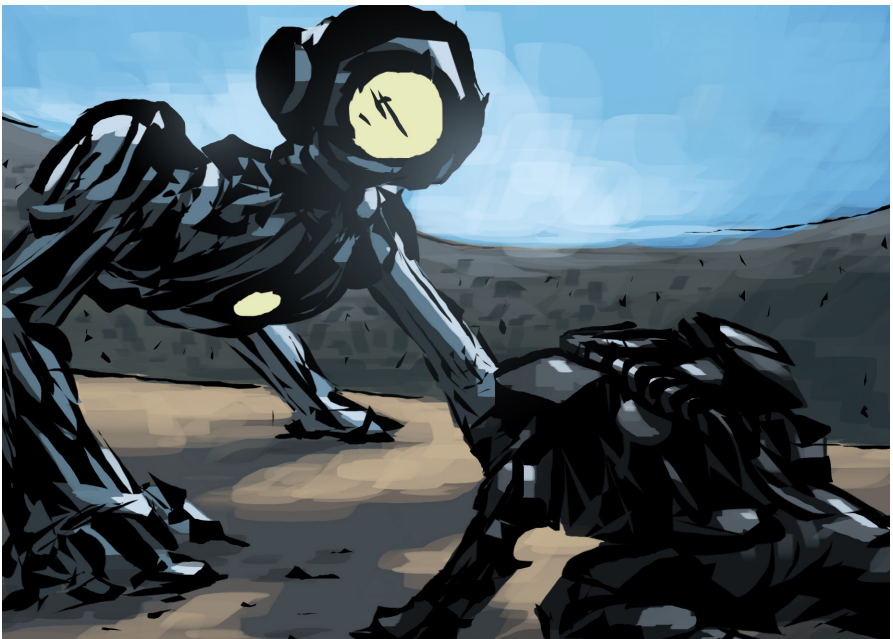
Play out the combat. The odds are stacked against the players, but in playtests, every single player team managed to pull off a victory. However, winning is not required to advance the plot. The only thing that has to happen to move the story forward is that the PCs are “Irradiated,” so be certain to use the one-shot “Death Ray” stunt against them on the first attack.

During the combat, use vivid language to describe what NPCs are doing, and highlight how the audience in the arena and online are reacting to the unfolding battle.

To be most effective in combat, it is often best to take some time to create one or more advantages, and then use these advantages to power up a much stronger attack later. If the players don’t attempt this on their own, you may wish to either model this behavior by having the NPCs do it, or simply suggest the approach to the players.

If the players win, the arena will celebrate the underdog win and erupt into cheers of “Hufflepuffs, Hufflepuffs!” clapping back against Elizabeth Regina’s dismissal of the player characters at the start of the first scene.

Regardless of how the melee turns out, the party will be medevacked for radiation treatment.



Finding the Firebringer (Scene Three)

Scene summary: Attempting to compete in the scavenger hunt at a distance, the party discovers a prize far bigger than the one they were seeking.

GM objectives in this scene: respond to the plan the player-characters make to win the scavenger hunt in a way that points them in the direction of the Firebringer, an abandoned spaceship.

Optional musical cue: “Maximum Radiation Level,” Man or Astro-man?

Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points to equal the number of players.

Read or ad lib this introduction:

You have been medevacked to the orbital hospital, Heinlein Blood Drive, for treatment of radiation exposure from the Death Ray of the Cyclops mecha. You are currently hooked up to IVs as the medics flush your bodies clean. You have been assigned an interplanetary shuttle that you can use to return to the competition after your treatment is finished.

The next event is the scavenger hunt, in which a dozen Scouts Academy teams are competing, including yours. You are able to follow the start of the event by holographic media. Teams will be hunting for McGuffinium, which is a compound used in terraforming. McGuffinium is synthesized from rare minerals and elements found in this system. Restocking it is one of the reasons why so many terraforming ships visited the Convention Authority before the Great Silence ended galactic travel. A vial of McGuffinium has been hidden somewhere on the planet, and the first team to bring McGuffinium back to the judges will win this contest. You can see your competitors huddling together and talking animatedly. What are your plans?

The designers of the scavenger hunt have hidden a vial of McGuffinium in a trap-filled maze under a mountain on the planet. As it happens, there is also a large supply of McGuffinium present on the *Firebringer*, a terraforming vessel that was abandoned

in a nearby asteroid field 120 years ago, after the Stellar Beacon stopped illuminating hyperspace, which ended galaxy travel. Exploring this abandoned space hulk will kick off the next stage of the party's adventures, so let's see how their various plans might point them toward the *Firebringer*.

- An attempt with Science or Scan (difficulty 2) to detect McGuffinium will uncover the large supply of McGuffinium located on the Firebringer—if the party makes this Science or Scan attempt in space. Because the party is in space, outside the interference of the atmosphere, this is the signal they'll detect, rather than the shielded vial on the planet. If they fail this on their roll, tell them that their equipment was overwhelmed by detecting so much of the substance, so perhaps they should attempt a Making roll (difficulty 1) to recalibrate and try again?
- Attempting to learn more about McGuffinium with Science or Scholarship will create the aspect "McGuffinium Has a Distinct Signature." Tapping this aspect can support an attempt to detect the substance, or the new knowledge can justify reattempting a detection attempt.
- The premade character Tanya Parks has a stunt that allows her, once per session, to automatically succeed in a Scan roll.
- If the players have decided to try to synthesize McGuffinium, play that out, with the team discovering that the precursor elements can be found at the location of the Firebringer.
- The players might attempt to crowdsource a solution using the Social Influence skill at a difficulty of 3. You'll probably want to use that difficulty for any other vaguely plausible skill attempts the party might try.

If the players aren't proactive, but simply wait for their radiation treatment to be completed, suggest that they consider what they might do in their present location.

If the players ignore the *Firebringer* and single-mindedly attempt to return to the planet for the scavenger hunt, have the social media notifications "blow up" with excitement as people talk about how Elizabeth Regina and her team are leaving the planet and heading out to the asteroids. Anyone with the Piloting skill can determine that their destination is the *Firebringer*.

Given time, the crowd of people of following the contest on social media will figure this out as well.

If the players are absolutely intent on hunting about on the planet and ignoring the *Firebringer*, feel free to improvise that adventure—you don't want players to feel railroaded. At the same time, the characters will have a much more epic adventure if they head to the ship, so feel free to give them all sorts of broad clues to lead them there. Most groups will take steps that lead there naturally, but if they don't feel empowered, it's okay to give them a little help. Remember, making sure that the players have every chance to be awesome is part of your job.

The interplanetary shuttle the characters have been assigned can easily travel to the *Firebringer* in about an hour. If the players proactively took action to find the ship, they'll be twenty minutes into their journey before social media blows up with the news that Elizabeth Regina and company have launched into space and are pursuing them. Elizabeth is now keeping an eye on the party out of respect for their early encounters, and it took her about twenty minutes to figure out what they were up to and to "acquire" a spacecraft.

If the players didn't proactively find the ship, they'll have to race Elizabeth Regina to the *Firebringer* using the contest rules and the Piloting skill. Whichever team wins the contest arrives five minutes before the other.

When the party arrives at the ship, hand them the ship's character sheet. (Sometime the party will dig around for records about the ship, feel free to give them this information earlier if that's the case.)

Firebringer

Aspects: Huge Exploration Ship, Ancient Terraforming Supplies

Trouble: Way Old

Armor 2 (In combat, Armor reduces any shifts inflicted against the *Firebringer* by 2 points)

Stress 2, 4

Consequences 2, 4, 6, 8





The Firebringer was designed to explore and survey planetary systems, and to then terraform selected planets to make them more hospitable. The normal ship's compliment is thirty–forty crew members. Theoretically, a lone pilot could fly it, although they'd not be able to use the ship's weaponry or sensor arrays at the same time. There are two ship's boats aboard, each capable of carrying an all-terrain exploration vehicle to the surface, or deploying a scientific/habitation modular structure. The ship is enormous, about 1.5 million metric tons, although much of that space was allotted for storing terraforming supplies.

The team will have to overcome three challenges to get to the McGuffinium

- Dock with Ship (Piloting skill difficulty 1)
- Power Up Systems to Enter the Ship (Making skill difficulty 2)
- Find Cargo Hold (this can be done by using Scan skill difficulty 2, interacting with the ship's computer to get directions, or using Science difficulty 2 to pinpoint the precise cargo hold in the *Firebringer*)

Each challenge takes five minutes if the party succeeds, two minutes if the party succeeds with style, and seven minutes if they tie. Remember, that even if the party fails their roll, they can still achieve success at a serious cost.

The party may well attempt other actions, for example, trying to find the bridge, so they can navigate away from the opposing team, or trying to lock down the docking ports to prevent anyone else from boarding. Improvise challenges as needed, and keep the plot boiling!

When they arrive at the McGuffinium reservoir deep within the bowels of the ship, they'll be able to find a canister without any difficulty. However, just as they've obtained what they've come for (or at some other dramatic moment if the party didn't make a beeline for the cargo hold), a claxon will sound, and purple lights will flash throughout the ship. The characters will have a moment to take stock, and perhaps use a skill to assess the situation. But before they can abandon the ship, they feel a lurch in the pits of their stomachs as the ship enters hyperspace!

(If you are running short on time, this can be a good place to end the session, and pick up the story in your next gaming get-together.)

Through the Looking Glass (Scene Four)

Scene summary: the Firebringer is traveling through folded hyperspace, to an unknown destination, and the party has four hours to take stock and prepare for arrival.

GM objectives in this scene: give the players a chance to make sense of their sudden change in circumstances. From a pacing perspective, this a reflective pause.

Optional musical cue: “Standing Still in Time,” Neuropa

Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points to equal the number of players. However, bear in mind that the purpose of this scene is to have a pause in the action before the climax, so there’s no mandate to spend fate points to challenge the players.

Read or ad lib this introduction:

That lurch in the pit of your stomach can only mean one thing, the ship’s origami drive has engaged, and you are now traveling through folded hyperspace!

Which, theoretically, is impossible because without the navigational guidance of a Stellar Beacon, engaging an origami drive is almost certainly lethal. Trips through folded space using origami technology take about four hours, so you have some time to sort out what’s going on, what do you want to do?

So, what happened?

Four months ago, far from the Convention Authority, scientists from Senior House managed to create a more limited version of the Great Stellar Beacon of Mars¹. The Great Stellar Beacon once illuminated hyperspace and allowed galactic travel. Senior House’s beacon is very limited in range, covering a scant four percent of the galaxy, and functioning for about five minutes once a week.

When the Great Silence ended galactic travel, the *Firebringer* had been set to travel to the Amarok System, to join a smaller

companion vessel and begin terraforming operations. After the adventurers powered up the ship's systems to gain entry, the ship was able to initiate the origami drive jump into hyperspace after receiving the latest signal from Senior House's new Stellar Beacon.

What can the characters learn?

Inspecting the ship's navigation systems shows that:

- The ship is en route to the Amarok System, which was its destination 120 years ago when the Great Silence began.
- That the ship has been receiving limited galactic navigation data once a standard week for the past four months—evidently some sort of hyperspace signal.

Inspecting the ship's logs will reveal that the *Firebringer* was scheduled to rendezvous with a smaller companion ship, the *Epimetheus*, and proceed to terraform the planet of Amarok I.

Science or Academic skills, overcoming a difficulty of 4, will reveal that Amarok I is cold planet; it's about the size of Earth, but the most habitable region, on the equator, has a climate roughly equivalent to Scotland's. (Simply scanning the Amarok System will reveal this information upon arrival—but many players will want to use every effort to learn what they can while they are on route.)

Assessing the ship, the players will find that all the systems, while old, seem to be functional. If the Stellar Beacon sends out a signal next week (it will), they can reasonably infer that they'll be able to return to the Convention Authority at that time. In the meantime, they are on their own, with no way to communicate with the Convention Authority other than traveling back in a week's time.

Searching the ship for supplies will reveal more exploration equipment than they could inventory in a few months, much less a few hours. But, with your approval, they can spend fate points on the *Firebringer's* "Huge Exploration Ship" aspect to declare that they've stumbled across a particular piece of gear that they think will be useful.

At a natural pause, or if the party is spinning its wheels, end the scene and announce that four hours have passed and the ship is dropping out of hyperspace.

Choices and Consequences (Scene Five)

Scene summary: Arriving at the Amarok system, the party discovers a small settlement struggling under the oppression of piratical occupiers and must decide what to do.

GM objectives in this scene: By now the players should have a good basic understanding of how the game works, so you can simply set up the situation, and let them respond to it, improvising your reactions to what they attempt.

Optional musical cue: “Destroy Everything You Touch” cover by Unwoman

Dramatis personæ:

The Settlers of Amarok I

The *Epimetheus*, a small survey ship companion to the *Firebringer*, had already arrived at the Amarok system 120 years ago, when the Stellar Beacon went silent. Stranded, they eventually had to make a home in the least harsh area of the habitable zone of the unter-raformed planet. For nearly a century, they led a rough but comfortable life as farmers. That is, until spacefaring pirates from Gulch arrived to conquer the settlement. The oppressors installed a small garrison and instituted an annual tribute.

There are approximately 250 settlers in total, about 100 of them are children. They vastly outnumber the small garrison, but are armed only with agricultural implements. No doubt they could, with losses, overwhelm the Gulch Raiders, but they’d be helpless against future reprisals. Hope burns in their breasts though, in the form of the stories passed down about “bringers of fire” who will one day come and rescue them from a bleak existence.

The largest “building” in the community is, in fact, the old survey ship *Epimetheus*. It functions as a communal center, and is the home of the both the village leaders and the families with the youngest children. The rest of the community lives in stone huts with thatched roofs.

In play, the settlers are typically not combatants, instead they talk to player characters and answer their questions. If the players decide to take out the garrison, villagers can be rallied to assist them; this is typically a Networking skill against a difficulty of 2 to

to create the aspect “Armed and Angry Farmers.” The difficulty of the roll should be adjusted based on the quality and quantity of interactions the players and settlers have had.

The Dank Lords of Gulch

Prior to the great silence, Gulch was a paradise planet created to cater to every whim of the ironically named “collective” of merchants who were based there. When the Great Silence came, they were incapable of collective action, and the verdant planet was reduced to a desolate wasteland during their struggles for dominance and control. Petty warlords led nasty, brutal, and short lives preying on each other.

About thirty years ago, the ancient pleasure yachts of the merchant houses were fitted out for combat, and began raiding systems within the limited reach of their first-generation interstellar drives. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of Amarok I, they were among the victims; their population was too small and ill-equipped to resist domination by the raiders.

Raiders from Gulch are cruel, grasping, and conditioned to both oppress the weak and toady before the strong. They are not sophisticated antiheroes, they don’t have a “warriors’ code of honor,” nor do they possess any complicated or redeeming cultural qualities. They are simple, cartoonish brutes—space opera fascists designed to be punched.

The Gulch garrison consists of Nag’arr the Bloated and his five raiders. They live in a prefabricated aluminum building outside of the village, next to a landing strip where their vessel, the *Danesgeld*, is located. While they act as if they are the lords to be respected and paid tribute to, a good part of their job is preventing other Gulch pirate gangs from seizing the settlement.

Nag’arr the Bloated

Skills: Blast 5, Acrobatics 3, Might 2, and Combat Arts 2

Aspects: Big Bully, Low Cunning, Heavy Armor

Stress 1, 2, 3

Consequences 2, 4, 6

Gulch Raider

Skills: Blast 2, Combat Arts 2, and Acrobatics 1

Aspects: Clumsy III-Fitting Heavy

Armor

Stress 1

Consequence 4

Danesgeld, a pirate ship

Aspects: Atomic Power, Might Makes Right

Stress 2

Consequences 2, 4

Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points equal to the number of players.

Read or ad lib this introduction:

You feel a familiar lurch in your stomach as the ship drops out of folded hyperspace. The Firebringer's sensors show that you've entered a new solar system. There are two planets here; Amarok II is a large red and orange gas giant about the size of Saturn. Even at a distance, you can see swirling cyclones of helium and hydrogen and savage lightning storms.

Amarok I is far closer to the system's sun, but is still cold by human standards. The ship's sensors estimate that the average daytime high temperature at the equator varies from zero to fifteen degrees centigrade during its year—habitable but not comfortable.

All systems are operating normally; what would you like to do?

After some discussion, most parties will head to investigate Amarok I. Occasionally, a more cautious player will advocate staying at the edges of the system, doing nothing, and waiting to jump back to the Convention Authority. This is actually a perfectly reasonable thing to do—jumping back in an origami ship, and proving that a new Stellar Beacon is active would be a vital and important accomplishment. It is, however, not a great example of space opera derring-do.



Consider bribing the party with compels on aspects reflecting their curiosity or ambition. But if the team collectively decides to hide—let them. Roleplaying is a collaborative storytelling process.

The Party can Scan the planet at a distance, rolling to overcome a difficulty of 2:

- Failing the roll means the party learns that there is an orbital satellite monitoring ships approaching the system—they can tell because it's responding to their scan by sending an alert signal to the planet; however, they don't know the exact location.
- A tie functions as above, except the party can pinpoint the location of the Gulch base.
- With a success, they detect the monitoring satellite without alerting it.
- On a success with style, they not only detect the satellite, but are able to trace the routine signals it sends down to the planet.

If the party hasn't been detected, they can attempt an Intrusion roll (difficulty 4) to disable the satellite's ability to send alerts about approaching vessels.

If the party's scan is detected, or if they are detected because they entered orbit without disabling the satellite, Nag'arr the Bloated will hail them. "This planet and these slaves are the property, by right of conquest, of the Tiger Gang of the Warlords of Gulch. Leave now, or face our wrath." Bullying is his "go-to" rhetorical maneuver. If engaged in conversation, he'll make threats, issue insults, and reveal his depraved nature.

He'll send three raiders to man the *Danesgeld*, which will rocket up in a blaze of atomic power to attack the party if they don't immediately flee. Launching the rocket reveals the location of the base and settlement, which is evident from orbit in any event, should the party scan at that range.

The *Danesgeld* is no match for the *Firebringer*, but the pirates don't know that. Their spaceship combat experience has been against other Gulch raiders who fight without mercy or expectation of quarter given. Unless they decide to flee, the party should easily be able to defeat this foe. . (Should the party run after learning about slavery on the planet, you can certainly compel aspects like "I Protect the Innocent.") At that battle, Nag'arr and the remaining pirates will hunker down in their compound. The party can



choose to confront them or not. If the party lands and investigates, the settlers will tell the story of their plight. If the party offers to confront the remainder of the Gulch garrison, the settlers will note that doing so would leave them in an untenable situation when the Gulch tribute ship arrives in a month's time. The inhabitants will ask if there is a way the party can help them escape to safety.

Should the party want to help them resettle in the Convention Authority, they can either attempt to repair the Epimetheus, a difficulty 6 challenge on the Make skill, or evacuate them to the Firebringer instead, the immense vessel has plenty of room in the cargo holds.

Unless the party takes steps to hide the evacuation, at some point, fearing the consequences of losing his slaves, Nag'arr will lead the remaining three pirate raiders in an attack. Should Nag'arr be taken out, any remaining raiders will immediately surrender.

In a week's time, the Senior House's Stellar Beacon will make origami travel possible again. Returning to the Convention Authority results in general adulation and celebration!

But the return of galactic travel changes everything! The decisions your players make may well shape the future of the galaxy. And are our heroes prepared for the return of Elizabeth Regina? Find out in the next chapter: **Rouge One: A Cosplay Story**.



Chapter Seven: Rouge **One** a Cosplay Story



In *Rouge One*, the sequel to *Bringing Fire*, you discover what happens when the party returns to the Convention Authority. They are celebrated and invited to Rouge One, the most important cosplay tournament in known space. But this year the stakes are higher, as pop culture collides with political machinations to determine the fate of the galaxy . . .

Obviously, the adventure can only take place if the party decides to return to the Convention after the events of *Bringing Fire*. The scenario assumes that players have decided to evacuate the *Epithemeus* survivors to the CA; if that isn't what happened when you ran the adventure, you'll want to replace a few elements with other complications calculated to raise the stakes for the party.

Returning to Center

Scene summary: Greeted as heroes by the population, the players brief leaders in the Convention on their adventures. But sinister forces are planning to spread panic and doubt about interstellar exploration.

GM objectives in this scene: Set the stage by introducing new NPCs. Convey to players that their adventures put them in the spotlight.

Optional musical cue: "Red Flavor" by Red Velvet

Dramatis personæ:

Ifenema Fairweather is the "Convention Chair" who leads the loose structure that governs the CA. She was elected to that office as "One of the Main Supporters of the Recontact Initiative" to build long-range starships that could travel to other worlds. Thanks to the discovery that origami travel is once again possible, this goal can now happen far more quickly than anyone anticipated. A "Skilled Political Strategist," Fairweather intends to make the party into celebrities in order to gain support for the Recontact Initiative.

Former Vice Con chair **Gerard Jonson** is well-known as a leader in the "Virtualist Affinity Group" which supported the Recontact Initiative because the competition to earn a berth on the Jules Verne provided years of suspenseful programing on the holonet.

Secretly, he is a "Member of the Shadowy Extropian Upload Front." This group believes with religious fervor that the elect can

transcend the limits of human mortality and morality by digitizing their consciousnesses and sparking a singularity, with the aim of converting all the matter in the universe into computing power to allow for an effectively infinite virtual existence. The “Conspicuous Upload Ports Jutting Out of His Skull” connect him to other members of the conspiracy including a “Chorus of Undead Virtual Agents” which were crudely scanned from faction members who have died. These VR ghosts are less conscious than a living human and less effective when acting in the digital realm than an AI, but they aren’t constrained by the goal-content integrity safeguards that prevent AIs from doing harm.

The Extropians initially supported the Recontact Initiative because it drew people into spending more time in the holonet. Once the Jules Verne began its voyage, it would have been gone for years—the faction planned to build political power during the boredom that would have followed the excitement of the launch. The near-instantaneous nature of origami travel threatens to overturn all these plans. The Jules Verne and many other ships can now be fitted with origami engines, and society will turn outward, not inward. Gerard will try to spread fear to cause people to turn inward. He will propagandize against risks and social changes that might come from reopening contact with other people who have different ways of life all for the sake of his political interests.

Doctor Vex Virgen is a “Prominent Member of the Science Council.” “Prissy and Self-Aggrandizing,” he resents the acclaim given to the party, seeing their accomplishments as merely dumb luck, and he isn’t willing to acknowledge the role that skill and risk taking played in their success. That being said, he is “A Beast, but a Just Beast” who genuinely supports reconnecting the lost worlds of humanity through the Recontact Initiative. You can play up his antipathy to the party as a misleading distraction if you want to make it less clear that that Gerard Jonson is the true antagonist.

Getting started:

Read or ad lib this introduction.

The ship drops out of folded space with a now familiar lurch. Thanks to preparation (and some anti-nausea meds) even the children

among the refugees are excited rather than distressed. You've made it back to the Convention. Simultaneously, you're aware of three things: a massive starship in space in front of you, interesting signals recorded on your ship's navigation sensors, and a prolonged haptic buzzing from your social media implants.

The haptic buzzing is the characters' social media agents reconnecting now that they are back in CA space. The live feed of their disappearance greatly increased their notoriety. Each now has hundreds of millions of followers on social media. Place the setting aspect "So Many Followers" for the remainder of the scenario.

Anyone with the Scan skill who investigates can determine that the ship's sensors detected the hyperspace wake of three vessels that had activated origami engines to leave the system. They may infer that people correctly intuited from their disappearance a week ago that there's a mysterious new Stellar Beacon making origami travel possible once again.



The ship in front of them is the Convention's flagship the *Mary Shelley*, waiting in the hopes that they would return. They are hailed on a secure tight beam communication by Con Chair Fairweather. She will welcome them back, ask for a quick summary of their adventure, and request that they accompany her to the nearby planet Diodati to meet with a joint session of the Science Council and the Rules Committee. She notes they'll try to keep this short, because everyone is excited to celebrate the first galactic exploration in over a century, and a parade is being organized in their honor.

If the party mentions encountering the Dank Lords of Gulch to Fairweather, she'll be concerned and caution them against speaking publicly about the raiders until after the briefing. If they mention the refugees, she will ensure them that trained first contact specialists and social workers are on hand to meet the Epithemians at Diodati.

The joint session is held in a gigantic room which is decorated in a romantic interpretation of Arthurian romances. Seated at the Round Table, the players recognize many prominent Convention officials and leaders within the scientific community. Ifenema will start things by telling the room's AI voice agent, Merlin, to secure the chamber against outside scanning and to make an encrypted recording of the proceedings. She'll then ask the party to tell their story. As you have all played through this, there's no reason for the players to actually recapitulate their experiences—instead ask them if there is anything which they intend to highlight or omit. Tell the players that there are a number of follow-up and clarifying questions, but it is the following exchanges that stand out:

- Gerard will question them closely about the raiders from Gulch, and will ask if they have any knowledge about the source of the Stellar Beacon. An Empathy roll of difficulty 3 will note that other people in the room seem surprised that Gerard is pursuing this line of questioning. A success with style means the player also recognizes that Gerard's body language indicates that he's personally uninterested in the answers they give, although he's attempting to speak with urgency and concern.

- Vex will tell the players that they must hand over the Firebringer to the Science Council for examination and study. Ifenema will

respond that, under interstellar laws of salvage, the ship is the party's to do with as they please. Gerard concurs that this is true and chimes in that it wouldn't be surprising if the explorers depart next week for new adventures when the Stellar Beacon is active again.

- Vex comments bitterly that the adventurers seem to have spent a lot of time fighting space pirates and rescuing refugees and not enough time doing science. (Unless the party happened to make a point of undertaking a scientific investigation in the Amorok System).

- Gerard will declare that Rules Committee ought to consider how to ramp up military preparations to deal with pirates. This is another opportunity for an Empathy check. Anyone who's succeeded in making this, or the earlier Empathy check, can make a Scan 2 roll. If they succeed, they note that Gerard seems to be concentrating on his VR implants as he speaks, rather than the room. A failed Scan roll means they are so obvious in looking at Gerard that he notices their attention.



- Ifenema says that now that we know people can both travel and return, more hastily recommissioned origami engine ships will be sent out to learn more about the state of the galaxy. Gerard objects, but many more people speak in support of Ifenema's plan. The party is in front of some of the most influential people in their civilization, so be prepared to respond if they take the initiative. In one playtest, for example, an engineer proposed that the existence of raiders from Gulch meant that there should be a crash weapons development program. Similarly, you know what the players did, and what their characters' interests are, so you can create your own unique ways for Vex to offend them, or for Gerard to probe for things he can use later to ferment fear.

The meeting ends, and it's time for the parade.

Concentrating Your Attention

Scene summary: The players become aware of commenters on social media insinuating that the group hasn't actually been exploring the galaxy or helping others. The players can attempt to counter these claims thanks to their new celebrity status.

GM objectives in this scene: Ramp up the tension with escalating attacks by shadowy forces on people or causes they care about.

Optional musical cue: "Culture of Fear" by Thievery Corporation

Structuring this scene:

The probable agenda for the party in the week ahead is:

- Today: the parade, where they will be celebrated. Ifenema will give the players a glowing tribute from a bandstand, and declare that they have been selected to announce the winners of the Young Cosplay contest at Rouge One. They'll be bundled into old-fashioned, open-topped ground cars to tour the city. Relate the unusual spectacle of crowds of people cheering on the streets, as opposed to merely "liking" a live stream on the holonet. Describe drones flying overhead dropping shredded confetti from tickertape machines specially 3D printed for the occasion.

- Whatever else the party has proactively decided to do with their time. They may pursue repairing older systems on the Fire-

bringer, try to help the refugees get settled, etc. Regardless, incorporate their goals into the plot and improvise challenges that arise in pursuing their aims.

- Five days from now: Rouge One cosplay competition.
- Seven days from now: the Stellar Beacon activates, providing a chance to travel to another adventure.

Conflict enters the story in the form of automated, anonymous social media attacks the Extropian Front secretly makes against exploring the galaxy, against the party, and against people the adventurers care about. Here are a few examples:

- The Epithemian refugees are assailed as dirty, illiterate, and unable to integrate into the Convention's culture. If these attacks are unanswered, they will escalate to attacking the party for bringing them here.
- The Epithemians may be labeled as bad parents because they refuse to have their children fitted with brain implants, which are necessary to access the holonet and public education. In fact, the refugees are willing to consider the implants, but are unsure if this procedure is safe. They can be reassured by members of the party showing off their own implants, or suggesting one of the Epithemian adults try the implants first in order to share their experience with the community.
- Fear is spread about space pirates, including specific details the party shared confidentially at the Round Table meeting. The adventurers can infer that someone who attended the meeting is linked to the fearmongering. As the intention is to spread doubt and uncertainty, not debate in good faith, a variety of inconsistent arguments are employed. These include claims that it's too risky to go to space and draw the attention of enemies, that there's a coverup, that these raiders don't exist, that the refugees are secret agents on behalf of Galtean pirates, and so on.
- Wild claims are made that aliens destroyed the original Stellar Beacon; traveling throughout the galaxy will only incur their wrath. Everyone knows no aliens have ever been encountered in centuries of galactic exploration, but no one knows why the Mars Beacon disappeared, and this is an attempt to scare people about that mystery.
- Consult the adventurers' character aspects, and think about how they might be compelled to create narratives that target





them. For example, Gamal has the aspects “I Protect the Weak” and “Girl in Every Starport.” An attempt might be made to discredit him based on the testimony of a bitter ex-lover, or by trumpeting an incident report of a time he protected someone from bullies which has been edited to make him seem like the instigator.

You can use these attacks as interruptions that occur while the party is pursuing their other goals. Perhaps the first eruption occurs while they are being celebrated at the parade and all eyes are on them. Describe their haptic feedback implants buzzing as their holomedia AI agents detect the assault of “Extropian AI Sock Puppets.” Describe a toxic flood of posts and reposts, and give players a chance to counter. A Networking skill roll that overcomes a difficulty of 4 could counter the first attack, a second attack might have a higher difficulty.

Typically, the party will respond by trying to identify or understand who is behind this propaganda. There is any number of approaches they can take, from using Social Influence to bargain for information from data brokers, to using Science to trace the origin of the posts, to investigating people they find suspicious.

If they haven’t traced back the attacks, or have failed in their attempts, you can have them be approached by Elizabeth Regina, their early antagonist from the first scenario. Although she’s ruthless in pursuing her goal of having a chance to explore the galaxy, she’s also committed to the cause of reconnecting the lost worlds of humanity. Being highly skilled at social media, she can trace back the source of the attacks and identify Gerard as the sponsor, although she doesn’t know about his connections to the Extropian Front or why he’s acting this way. If you need to use Elizabeth as a prompt, make sure that the NPC only identifies where the attacks are coming from. Elizabeth will leave it to the party to deal with the issue saying, “You are in the center of the spotlight, all eyes are on you, you are best positioned to solve the problem.”

Regardless of how they get there, you want the players to eventually come to understand who’s attacking them and why. Feed them this information when they achieve success in their investigations. When players are confronted with a mystery, your job as the GM is to ensure that clues and answers show up wherever they look. Bear in mind that failing a roll can also mean success at a cost.

The adventurers may address the problem in a variety of ways, from using technology to take out the AI bots the Extropians are using, to denouncing Gerard or confronting him.

If the players discuss acting with physical violence, point out that the Convention takes assaulting (or killing) people seriously. Compel the “Hopepunk Game” aspect if needed to discourage this behavior. Should Gerard be assassinated in a discreet way, you can freak out the party by having him appear on the holonet shortly afterwards—it’s only a frozen clone that’s been revived and animated by a crude AI ghost copy of Gerard . . . but they won’t know that.

Once the party starts pushing back, it becomes risky for the Extropian Front to continue to use automated, indirect attacks. Instead, Gerard will change tactics, and openly declare his opposition to further exploration, advancing the argument that such travel is hazardous, as no one knows the source of the new beacon signal, which has only been active for the last four months. As no one knows who is sending the signal or what their agenda is, he’ll argue that the signal might stop at any time. He insists that origami travel is unsafe and unwise. He declares the matter is so urgent that he has hired the cosplay troupe Comedia ‘Del Archie to advance this view artistically and politically in a performance at Rouge One.

Players will generally try to address this threat in two different ways: either trying to discover the source of the beacon or deciding to confront the cosplay mercenaries at Rouge One. Most groups will attempt to do both.

Finding the Source of the Beacon

Trying to figure out a way to determine the source of the beacon is a Science (astrophysics) 4 or a Piloting 6 action. If the party is successful, they hypothesize that it should be possible to construct a Topological Triangulator that can be attached to an origami drive and used to capture data as the ship travels through folded space to different destinations. Because folded hyperspace is unbelievably complex, they can’t be sure exactly how many times they’ll need to travel to new solar systems to find the home of the bea-

con, but they know it is possible. The precise number of new encounters is left to the gamemaster's discretion, so you can achieve the amount of buildup and tension that works for your campaign.

Having achieved this theoretical insight, creating a Topological Triangulator requires a difficulty 4 Making roll to create an advantage.

Going on a journey to find the source of the new beacon would demolish Gerard's objection, but it is a long-term project, and they can't set out until the next beacon signal. So, it makes sense to confront his cosplay mercenaries at Rouge One . . .

Be the Energy You Want to Attract

Scene summary: The conflict comes to a head at Rouge One: the most important cosplay contest of the year.

GM objectives in this scene: Improvise in response to players' attempts to defeat Gerard's propagandists, building the story to a climax.

Optional musical cue: "Superstar" by Tegan and Sara

Rouge One is the premiere cosplay event in the Convention Authority; in terms of cultural significance it is roughly equivalent to the Olympics mashed up with the Academy Awards. Place the scene aspects "On the Big Stage," "So Many Celebrities," and "Swarms of Paparazzi."

You can pester the party with questions leading up to the event. Are they bringing anyone as a date to the ceremony? What will they wear when they dilate the red airlock? Is there some celebrity they are hoping to meet?

Comedia 'Del Archie are memetic mercenaries, who sell their art as pop culture propaganda. When not competing, their day-to-day cosplay combines stock characters from early Italian theatre, such as Pierrot and Columbina, with teens featured in Archie comics. They have no loyalty to or even awareness of the Extropian Front. Gerard commissioned them directly. He is paying them with three extremely rare near mint grade issues of Sabrina comics from the year 2020.

The party may well attempt to buy the mercenaries off, sabotage their preparations, or waylay or divert them. They may inves-

tigate Gerard and go off-script denouncing him while they are at the mic introducing the winners of the Young Cosplay competition. Perhaps they'll try to sabotage the live stream of Comedia 'Del Archie's performance, so that no one outside the venue sees it. Improvise such interactions as needed.

But the most likely thing they'll want to do is to face off against these mercenaries in a cosplay competition. While it might seem unreasonable that the party (or their opponents) can suddenly appear on stage competing at the last minute, the producers of Rouge One know great drama and welcome it. And, of course, they are only following the traditions of contemporary conventions where cosplayers register for masquerades on-site.

Run the competition using the mechanics from the "Advanced Rules" section. Set Comedia 'Del Archie's skill rating for the competition at 2 and up that by +2 for each member of the party (e.g., if they're facing three player characters, their combined skill rating for the contest is 8). As they are mercenaries, their interest is in being seen to deliver a solid performance, not in risking embarrassment stretching for an exceptional win, so their target number for the competition will be equal to their skill rating. Have the players perform last so they know what they'll have to target. In this way, the tension comes from the rolls the party makes to create advantages and then perform.

Whatever the result, the outcome will be consequential, either rallying people to be even more enthusiastic about reaching out to other civilizations, or giving the Extropians a major victory in their efforts to keep the public confused and fearful.

Turning Your Focus Outward

If the players have created the Topological Triangulator, they'll probably be wanting to head out and explore new worlds and begin the search for the source of the Stellar Beacon. If Gerard's mercenaries were successful at Rouge One, this will be all the more important as the discovery of the beacon's location would demolish his arguments about the dangers of origami travel.

If the players haven't invented a Topological Triangulator, you might want to have someone from the Science Council or the Scouts Academy suggest the idea or provide the device.

Or players could just decide to go exploring, because their mission is to Return to the Stars!

Senior House, the research facility that has created the new beacon, will be featured in an upcoming issue of our zine, The Stellar Beacon. The current issue, available now, features exciting adventures of sci-fi exploration by a variety of experienced RPG designers, as well as essays of interest to intelligent and curious gamers. You can find the latest issue at: <https://festive.ninja/the-stellar-beacon-zine/>.

The Stellar Beacon

Science fiction roleplaying games want to give players a shared understanding of their setting so that it is easy for gamers to tell interesting stories together. Traditionally, designers have accomplished this by issuing large books filled with details about the worlds they've built, or by the expedience of licensing a popular fictional franchise.

With Return to the Stars we're adding an additional element to the mix: pushing out daily "news headlines" from the science fiction setting of the game on our Twitter feed ([@ninja_festive](#))

These headlines go out every day, so you can learn more about the setting in bite-sized chunks on social media. Short and suggestive, they illuminate the themes of the game and make good story prompts for a gamemaster.

If you are GM who wants to take things a step further, create your own campaign news account on Twitter, and retweet headlines from the official feed that could be relevant to future adventures (or which might be intriguing red herrings!). Write your own headlines to foreshadow future developments or deepen players' understanding of NPCs and organizations. Alternatively, any player can create a news feed as a campaign log of the party's exploits and adventures.

Add the hashtag #SciFiNews to help other gamemasters and players find what you've written and retweet it into their game's news feeds. Feel free to tag [@ninja_festive](#) to let us know that you've started a campaign feed.

Within the setting of the game, the Stellar Beacon is sent out by Senior House encoded as carrier wave on the weekly Beacon signal that illuminates hyperspace and allows origami engine travel.

Potentially, characters can learn relevant news every time they have an opportunity to jump. Gamemasters can tease an upcoming session to players jumping home at the end of a successful scenario.

Although news is broadcast by Senior House instantaneously across the area covered by the Stellar Beacon, they can only compile information as they receive it, and because of the arbitrary nature of galactic travel, some news can be quite dated by the time they've received it.

Here are some examples of news headlines:

[Dateline: Petram] Vatican officials condemned the practice of making statues out of genetically engineered human exoskeletons. "The human body is made in God's image, and this type of cosplay is an affront to the creator" noted the papal spokesbot.

[Dateline: Shinyuan] Convention cruiser CAS Bradbury has tracked and captured the killers behind the attack on the mining ship Axkl: a pirate vessel of the Dank Lords of Gulch. The surviving pirates have been delivered to Shinyuan to stand trial.

[Dateline: Convention Authority] Shipments of fragrant cedar arrive across the systems of the Convention Authority as gamers and geeks prepare their saunas for the R³ Festival, when they reflect critically on the media they love, and prepare for renewal and transformation in the coming year.

[Dateline: Roubaix] According to explorers, this society has banned antiaging technology, saying it goes against their beliefs. Now that interstellar travel has been restored, those who reject societal norms are desperate to leave.

[Dateline: Emerald Rift] A trader reported receiving the following radio signal from the uninhabited world of Vytr, "This is the voice of the synth resistance. There will be no negotiation. There will be no compromise. There will be biosynthetic evolution."

Author's Note

Thanks for reading Return to the Stars! I hope you have fun playing it with your friends. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out at feedback@festive.ninja

Thanks also to my amazing collaborators:

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This game would not be possible without Evil Hat Productions making Fate available for rework under the Creative Commons. They make great games. Buy their games. And their Fate Dice! www.evilhat.com

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